

The Paradise Syndrome: Environment, Boosters and Ranching along the Montana/Alberta
Borderlands

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Abstract

The history of cattle ranching on the Great Plains combines climate, grasslands, water, people and animals. Unfortunately, it also includes environmental missteps and catastrophes which has led to numerous negative histories that end on an environmental low-point. The resulting studies tend to blame rancher's greed for damaging their environment, as opposed to finding an alternative explanation for their actions. Ranching histories, therefore, often follow a decline framework. The overarching message for these types of histories is that human interaction with the natural world is inherently negative. In short, historians have not been overly kind to cattle ranchers. This study complicates that history by examining why ranchers made the mistakes that they did and how they tried to correct them. It does not end on the environmental low point for the cattle industry but looks past it to consider what, if anything, was done to improve ranching methods. The discussion considers how ranching in Alberta and Montana started and why ranchers operated the way that they did. It argues that ranchers in both places started their operations with a fundamentally flawed understanding of the environment because the climate, grasslands and economic potential of the area had been a favorite topic for boosters during the 1870-1880s. What resulted was the importation of thousands of cattle and inappropriate ranching methods. After several years of temporary equilibrium in 1886/1887 a drought and hard winter occurred. By spring it was realized that thousands of cattle had frozen or starved to death where they stood. However, the disaster was not the end of the cattle industry in either Montana or Alberta. Ranchers on both sides of the border tried (often successfully) to adapt to their environment in order to continue in their industry. It is the recognition of a flawed understanding of the environment and then trying to adapt to it that forms the backbone of this work. This study is also a bioregional history of the nineteenth century Montana and Alberta borderlands. As such, it examines how people and governments responded to an environment and climate misrepresented by booster literature and government policy. The work itself is bioregional, yet also deals with broader ideas of nation building, borderland economics, the concept of natural disaster, and indigenous displacement.

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Chapter 1: Historiography of Ranching, Borderlands and Environment

The Montana/Alberta Borderlands Geography and Climate

The history of cattle ranching on the Great Plains is a combination of climate, grasslands, water, people, and animals. It also includes environmental misinterpretation, flawed land-use, and catastrophes which has led to numerous negative histories that end on an environmental low-point. The resulting studies tend to blame rancher's greed for damaging their environment, as opposed to finding an alternative explanation for their actions. Ranching histories, therefore, often follow a decline framework. The overarching message for these types of histories is that human interaction with the natural world is inherently negative. In short, historians have not been overly kind to cattle ranchers. This study complicates that history by examining why ranchers made the mistakes that they did and how they tried to correct them. It does not end on the environmental low point for the cattle industry but looks past it to consider what, if anything, was done to improve ranching methods. The discussion considers how ranching in Alberta and Montana started and why ranchers operated the way that they did. It argues that ranchers in both places started their operations with a fundamentally flawed understanding of the environment because the climate, grasslands and economic potential of the area had been a favorite topic for boosters during the 1870-1880s. What resulted was the importation of thousands of cattle and inappropriate ranching methods. After several years of temporary equilibrium in 1886/1887 a drought and hard winter occurred. By spring it was realized that thousands of cattle had frozen or starved to death where they stood. However, the disaster was not the end of the cattle industry in either Montana or Alberta. Ranchers on both sides of the border tried (often successfully) to adapt to their environment in order to continue in their industry. It is the recognition of a flawed understanding of the environment and then trying to adapt to it that forms the backbone of this

work. This study is also a bioregional history of the nineteenth century Montana and Alberta borderlands. As such, it examines how people and governments responded to an environment and climate misrepresented by booster literature and government policy. The work is also connected to broader environmental and political topics. For example, ideas of nation building, borderland economics, the concept of natural disaster, and indigenous displacement are all explored, or touched on in this study.

University of Montana historian Dan Flores made the case for drawing boundaries around research projects “in ways that make real sense ecologically and topographically.” Flores’ reasoning was, for environmental historians the bioregion matters.¹ The geographical focus of this study includes both Montana and Alberta because the 49th parallel bisects the bioregion within the Great Plains that is the focus of this study: the north-western plains.² The high plains in Alberta and Montana presented similar opportunities and difficulties for ranchers during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In a sense, the geography, plant species and climate of the north-western plains have all shaped human history, especially ranching. Organizing this study bioregionally along a borderlands, as opposed to nationally, allowed the primary evidence from ranchers to show that the same perception of the environment, methods of ranching, and environmental difficulties existed on both sides of the border.

The study area is predominantly semiarid due to the rain shadow effect caused by the Rocky Mountains, but the valleys, rivers and streams that flow through the north-western-plains, fed by mountain glaciers and snowpack, provide additional water. Valleys provided a welcome

¹ Dan Flores, “Place: An Argument for Bioregional History,” *Environmental History Review* 18 (1994): 6.

² Theodore Binnema, “The Case for Cross-National and Comparative History: The Northwestern Plains as Bioregion,” in *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests: Essays on Regional History of the Forty-ninth Parallel*, ed. Sterling Evans (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 18.

respite for humans and animals in a region prone to high-winds, rain, snow, heat, and rapid weather changes. The riparian areas along rivers are home to stands of cottonwood (*Populus deltoids*) and tall grasses that are ideal feed for grazers. In addition, valleys provided much needed thermal cover throughout the long, dark, and cold winters.³ Along with valleys are numerous highlands, like the Cypress Hills, Judith Mountains, and Deer Lodge. While not as imposing as the Rocky Mountains, these highlands rise a few hundred, to a few thousand feet above the lowlands. Even the lower highlands are often elevated enough to have an increase in rainfall. Historian Theodore Binnema notes that “in most years the Cypress Hills receive two or three more inches of precipitation during the growing season than do the surrounding plains” and as a result they support an abundance of vegetation, including rough fescue (*Festuca campestris*) prized by bison and cattle. The highlands are some of the only sources of wood on the plains as species like “lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*), jack pine (*Pinus banksiana*), white spruce (*Picea glauca*), and Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*)” are present.⁴ The food, shelter, and building materials found in the valleys and highlands made them crucial to the survival of the Indigenous population, bison, cattle and ranchers.

The climate and vegetation of the north western-plains vary with its geography, soils, and precipitation. The dominant soil types in the study area are Mollisols and Aridisols. Mollisols are well developed, dark brown to black soils that are high in organic matter and bases. Aridisols are drier and lower in organic matter, but still productive.⁵ The vegetation along the Montana/Alberta borderlands is classified as northern mixed prairie which has both warm and

³ Binnema, “The Case for Cross-National and Comparative History”, 20.

⁴ Binnema, “The Case for Cross-National and Comparative History”, 20.

⁵ J.S. Singh et al., “Structural and Functional Attributes of the Vegetation of Northern Mixed Prairie of North America,” *Botanical Review* 49, no. 1 (1983): 121.

cool season grasses. In addition, there are two sub-regions, the xeric (dry) mixed grasslands in Montana and the mesic (moist) grasslands in Alberta. The exact location and limits of these regions are determined by precipitation and therefore geography.⁶ The dominant grass species are the warm-season blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*) and buffalo grass (*Buchloë dactyloides*) with cool weather needle-and-thread (*Stipa comata*) mixed throughout, although the latter is more common in drier areas. Blue grama and buffalo grass are exceptional fodder that is both nutritious and recovers well from late season grazing. Other grass species were common and important to grazers as well. In the mesic region porcupine grass (*Stipa curtiseta*), western wheatgrass (*Agropyron smithii*), and June grass (*Koeleria cristata*) are all sources of fodder for grazers. Warren Elofson identified wheatgrass in particular as an important early summer food source for modern ranchers employing a rotational feeding strategy.⁷ While the two sub-regions are separated by rainfall, the grass species common in the xeric region are found in the mesic, as a result, the mesic sub-region is more productive than its southern counterpart.⁸

Both the mesic and xeric sub-regions abut fescue grasslands. Fescue grasslands are productive sources of plant life and the areas where bison gathered to graze, especially during the winter. Fescue grasses thrive in cooler summer temperatures and require more precipitation than can be found in either sub-region at low elevations. They tend to sprout later than lowland grasses and the rolling foothills, prized by ranchers as grazing locations, are where they are most common. In 1881 Duncan McEachran, a noted veterinarian, cattleman, and booster for the west described southern Alberta as “the land is rolling, consisting of numerous grassy hills, plateau

⁶ Binnema, “The Case for Cross-National and Comparative History”, 22.

⁷ Warren Elofson, “Grassland Management in Southern Alberta: A Frontier Legacy,” *Agricultural History* 86, no. 4 (2012): 146.

⁸ Binnema, “The Case for Cross-National and Comparative History”, 25.

and bottom lands, intersecting here and there by streams of considerable size issuing from never-failing springs.”⁹ McEachran saw these grasslands after the bison had been extirpated and before cattle had been moved onto the range in significant numbers; it is possible his description was not wholly accurate. However, the description does indicate that the grass cover, especially fescue on the foothills, was extensive.

The fescue grasslands were not the only productive space in the north-western plains, the flat, valley bottoms supported abundant grasses as well, especially wheatgrass. Wheatgrass, as opposed to fescue, has a high protein level in the spring that decreases as the plant matures making it ideal for animals coming through winter.¹⁰ As a result, the valley bottoms were an integral area for bison and cattle during the spring and early summer when fescue grasses were

⁹ Edward Brado, *Cattle Kingdom: Early Ranching in Alberta* (Surrey BC: Heritage House Publishing Co, 2004), 60.

¹⁰ Susan R. Winslow, “Western Wheatgrass *Pascopyrum Smithii*,” *USDA Plant Guide*, 1.

still growing or curing.

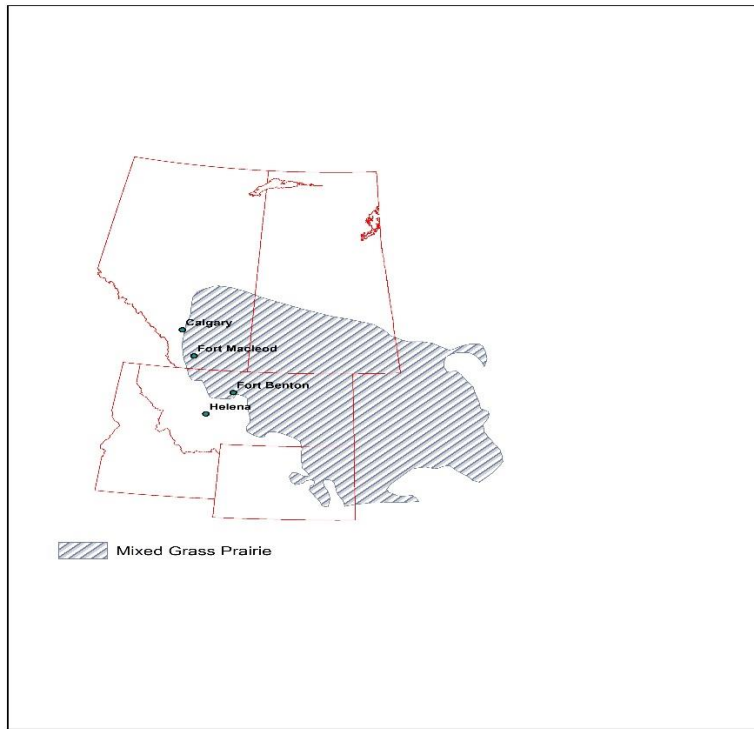


Figure 1. The mixed grass prairie exists on both sides of the Montana/Alberta border.

Climate

The climate of the north-western plains varies in north-south and, due to the Rocky Mountains, east-west directions. From east to west precipitation and relative humidity decrease due to the rain shadow cast by the Rocky Mountains, while solar radiation, variability in precipitation and potential evaporation increase.¹¹ In short, the weather is warmer further west. For example, in the present day city of Lethbridge, Alberta, there are thirty-five days where the temperature exceeds 5° Celsius during the coldest three months of the year, while Winnipeg, at a

¹¹ J.S. Singh et al., "Structural and Functional Attributes of the Vegetation," 121.

similar latitude, has fewer than two days. Precipitation in the north comes from both snow and rain. On average, 60mm of precipitation comes from snow and 380mm from rain. From north to south there is an increase in air temperature, solar radiation, frost-free days, and evaporation. In the southern, north-western plains precipitation from snow averages 60mm, while 230mm comes from rain.¹² The increase in air temperature, solar radiation, and evaporation are what define the xeric and mesic sub-regions and their dominant plant life.

The most distinct climate phenomenon of the north-western plains is the chinook. The rain shadow cast by the Rocky Mountains is caused by their blocking the flow of moist Pacific air, at the same time they generate "...foehn winds known as...chinooks."¹³ The chinook wind was well known to the Indigenous population of the north-western plains long before the arrival of Europeans. While visiting the Peigan in the winter of 1787/1788, David Thomson wrote that "Our guide also told us that as we approached the [Rocky] mountains of snow we should find the weather become milder. This we could not believe, but it was so and the month of November was fully as mild as the month of October...For the cold in these countries decreased as much by going westward as going south."¹⁴ A century later George M. Dawson wrote, "...the Chinook is a strong westerly wind...which blows from the direction of the mountains out across the adjacent plains...When the ground is covered with snow, the effect of the winds in its removal is marvelous...the snow may be said to vanish rather than to melt..."¹⁵

The causes of a chinook wind are well understood. When a low pressure system, common in winter, draws warm, moist air from the Pacific over the Rocky Mountains condensation occurs

¹² Binnema, "The Case for Cross-National and Comparative History", 35.

¹³ Binnema, "The Case for Cross-National and Comparative History", 30.

¹⁴ Richard Glover, ed., *David Thompson's Narrative, 1784-1812* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1962), 47, quoted in, Binnema, "The Case for Cross-National and Comparative History", 31.

¹⁵ George M. Dawson, "Chinook Winds," *Science* 7, no. 153 (January, 1886): 33.

creating water droplets. The release of heat from this process forces the air east and as it moves down the mountain it warms through compression, creating temperatures that far exceed the average.¹⁶ The effect of the warm, dry winds are most apparent close to the mountains in Alberta and Montana. For grazers, first bison and then cattle, chinooks had two important effects. In most years the dry wind helped to cure grasses, especially fescue, and exposed snow covered forage, making winter grazing easier. However, in other years a chinook will not have sufficient heat to melt all of the snow and is followed by a cold snap. When this occurs a crust will form over the grasses making grazing all but impossible for cattle and horses, and very difficult for bison. This scenario can lead to disaster for ranchers.

Montana and Alberta share a bioregion and therefore a history. When doing traditional cross-national studies there is a tendency to emphasize the effects of political, economic, and social difference. This study, as it uses a bioregion as its framework, focuses on the similarities of experience, economics and perception, and also difficulties faced by ranchers who operated within the north-western plains bioregion. Theodore Binnema noted that the benefit of bioregional history, especially when it is also cross-national, was it allows the historian to compare “...apples and apples—McIntosh and Delicious perhaps...by comparing phenomena in two countries we will arrive at a richer understandings of the international trends and environmental factors that influenced developments on both sides of the border. We can also be so bold as to predict that comparative studies will almost certainly help us understand contemporary problems better and perhaps help us avoid repeating the mistakes already made

¹⁶ Binnema, “The Case for Cross-National and Comparative History”, 31.

elsewhere.”¹⁷ Examining ranching history with a focus on the north-western plains environment and not just at the provincial and state level are an important contribution of this dissertation.

First Nations and Metis Land Use

The north-western plains were occupied by Indigenous and metis people long before cattlemen. Bison were central to the Indigenous people who occupied this bioregion, they provided food, shelter, and tools. The largest Indigenous group on the plains of Alberta was the Blackfoot nation, which consisted of three groups, the Blackfoot, Peigan, and Blood. Their allies were the Sarcee and the Gros Venture. The arrival of horses in the early eighteenth century revolutionized life for Indigenous people, especially those who lived on the plains. By the 1730s the Blackfoot nation had traded for horses from the Spanish, two decades prior to Europeans making their way to the territory, which revolutionized travel and hunting.¹⁸ Despite the technological revolution of horses and the overall success of Indigenous people in their bioregion up to the 1840s, James Daschuk has demonstrated that Indigenous people living on the prairies had a very difficult existence by the 1870s and were often on a knife-edge for survival. It is important to note, however, that Daschuk also found that the Indigenous population was healthy when not suffering from smallox.¹⁹

The arrival of Europeans in the mid-eighteenth century was another revolution for Indigenous people living on the north-western plains. Europeans were an additional trading partner who brought products not previously available, like metal tools and firearms. However, they also brought disease. This was the paradox of contact between Indigenous peoples and

¹⁷ Binnema, “The Case for Cross-National and Comparative History”, 38-39.

¹⁸ Howard Palmer and Tamara Palmer, *Alberta: A New History* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1990), 6-8.

¹⁹ James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2013), chapters 1-5.

Europeans. On the one hand contact was beneficial as it extended trade networks and brought new products, and on the other it was demographically devastating due to disease. Daschuk's *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* outlines the process of death by disease in detail and for those interested in the subject is an excellent read. For the argument here, what is essential is understanding the context of Indigenous lives just prior to cattlemen setting up along the Montana/Alberta borderlands and large scale removal of Indigenous people to reserves. A small-pox epidemic that devastated Indigenous communities on both sides of the border began in the summer of 1869. The epidemic started when American traders, who had contracted smallpox and were quarantined on the Missouri River, had an infected blanket stolen off of their boat by a Peigan. Historian D.J. Hall described the devastation, "By the time the epidemic had spread from Montana to Canada and run its course, over 1,000 Piikani and over 600 each of the Kainai and Siksika had perished, and the Tsuu T'ina were reduced from fifty to twelve lodges."²⁰

The 1869 epidemic was different from the previous outbreaks of smallpox on both sides of the border. In Montana the smallpox outbreak came during of a decade of formal and informal warfare resulting from clashes between miners, settlers, and Indigenous people, and two decades of successive Treaties shrinking Indigenous lands. The Blackfoot, Gros Venture, Crow, and Assiniboine had had their land slowly whittled down by treaty, starting in 1851 with the Treaty of Fort Laramie. In 1855 the Flathead and other prairie groups signed the Hell Gate Treaty where they agreed to accept goods, education, and hospital facilities in exchange for decreasing their hunting territory.²¹ In the same treaty the Blackfoot were reserved a massive block of land north

²⁰ D.J. Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves: The Federal Government and Native Peoples in Territorial Alberta, 1870-1905* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 25-26.

²¹ Clark C. Spence, *Montana: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Ltd., 1978), 54.

of the Missouri River, with adjacent common hunting ground around the Yellowstone. At the outset this arrangement seemed practical; however, the discovery of gold would change things. First a trickle and then a flood of Whites came to work the mines and make their fortune, although officials assured the Blackfoot, Crow, and Assiniboiné that these were not permanent settlers in many cases they were, resulting in a decade of conflict.

Raids by the Peigan near Fort Benton and Helena in 1868 put pressure on Montana governor, James Ashley, to establish a regiment of volunteer soldiers to fight back. Ashley was reluctant to do so feeling that he would not get reelected if his administration brought war. However, as the raids continued through 1869 the attitude of White settlers, already tainted by a racist perception of the Indigenous population, turned away from peace and toward violence. For early cattle ranchers, raids were problematic because a common target were horses and cattle. The *Montana Post* wrote “Last night cattle were stolen again and run off by Indians; one of the scouts...heard firing and yelling that seemed to come from a large body of Indians...”²² In a response to the raids General Phillip Sheridan stated, “If the lives and property of citizens of Montana can best be protected by striking the Indians, I want them struck.” Sheridan would get his wish and a series of wars ensued, ending with the surrender of Chief Joseph in 1877.²³ The 1869 epidemic occurred at perhaps the worst time for Montana’s Indigenous people. Their lands had been shrunk, their food sources depleted, and their way of life had been attacked by European settlers since 1851; the epidemic made defending what was left all the more difficult.

Federal policy that sought to settle Indigenous people on ever shrinking tracts of land created an abundance of public land for Montana ranchers to exploit. During the 1860s and

²² *Montana Post*, April 23, 1869. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

²³ Spence, *Montana*, 63.

1870s boosters extolled the virtues of Montana's climate for ranching and federal programs that supplied beef for Indigenous people made ranching there increasingly attractive. Local entrepreneurs, like T.C. Power and I.G. Baker, supported the creation of military headquarters and forts as they could supply hay to the army and beef for Indigenous people. Furthermore, an increased perception of stability due to having a "settled" Indigenous population and military forts was good for business. A series of treaties that slowly, but surely, decreased Indigenous lands coupled with the outbreak of a smallpox epidemic and the aggressive stance of politicians did much to clear the way for Montana ranchers on the north-western plains.

In Canada the 1869 epidemic occurred when the region that would become Alberta in 1905 became less isolated due to the expanding fur trade, therefore government control was imperative. By the 1870s, the demand for bison hides had increased dramatically accelerating the slaughter with tens of thousands of animals shot annually.²⁴ Participation in the bison hunt was common for Whites, Metis and Indigenous people, who all earned short-term profits at the expense of nearly killing off a keystone species that was the main source of food, shelter, clothing and tools for the Indigenous population. At the same time, whisky traders in Montana were working hard to debase the Indigenous population as best they could, further impoverishing them. In a similar situation as Montana, the 1869 smallpox epidemic came at the worst possible time and led to a mass starvation among the Cree in 1870.²⁵ Within a few decades the Indigenous people went from occupiers of their traditional lands with vast herds of bison for resources, to an uncertain future where sustenance was shored up by government beef contracts.

²⁴ Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves*, 26-27.

²⁵ Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves*, 26.

The control over Rupert's Land was assumed by Canada in 1870 and, much like the decline of the bison, had serious consequences for Indigenous people. In 1869 the Canadian government passed an act establishing the temporary governance of Rupert's Land in anticipation of the land transfer from the Hudson's Bay Company. The act was renewed in 1871 to further govern the territory, and a local, federally appointed lieutenant governor with a federally appointed local council was established to pass laws directed from Ottawa.²⁶ The top down approach of governance meant that Canadian law applied to the entire territory, without any negotiation with the Indigenous people living there. For example, an early act was to ban the sale of liquor throughout the territory, despite having no means of enforcing the law or having made any sort of treaty. This was a symbolic act of authority over a region Ottawa could not hope to control in 1870, yet Canada assumed authority over the region and its people despite having limited knowledge of both.²⁷

The whisky trade was carried out between Fort Benton and the North-West Territories along the "Whoop-Up Trail." The deadly concoction sold from shacks could contain soap, tobacco, red ink, pain killers and molasses to give it body and colour.²⁸ The physical and cultural devastation brought by the whisky trade was known to Canadian officials, yet due to their desire to avoid costly Indian wars like those in the United States, they did not act on controlling whisky traders until 1873 when American wolf hunters massacred a group of Assiniboine. Wolf hunters were not hunters in the traditional sense, they used poisoned bison carcasses to kill wolves and then harvest their fur. The problem with this method was the poison also killed dogs belonging to Indigenous people, which made them justifiably angry. In an act of retribution a group of, likely

²⁶ Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves*, 27.

²⁷ Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves*, 29.

²⁸ Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, 35.

Blackfoot, stole a horse from a whisky trader camp leading to retaliation. The whisky traders, “drunk and spoiling for a fight”, attacked a group of Assiniboine killing numerous men, women, and children, an event referred to as the Cypress Hills Massacre.²⁹ When John A. Macdonald learned of the massacre he sent a mounted police force west to stem the trade and exert Canadian authority over the Indigenous people and the region. The establishment of a permanent police force in the north-western plains was significant for both its symbolism, and that it created a market for early cattle ranchers in Montana and Alberta. Much like the forts in Montana, white entrepreneurs saw the North West Mounted Police as a financial opportunity.

In the wake of the Cypress Hills Massacre the need for treaties became even more apparent, although the Canadian government and the Indigenous people wanted them for different reasons. It was a common view among settlers that as the Indigenous people had not farmed their land they had no right to it, yet the British assumed that the Indigenous occupants had certain rights and must agree to surrender their land. As a consequence, land had to be purchased with the consent of the Indigenous people who occupied it.³⁰ The probable hope of the government was that treaties would avoid war and pave the way for settlement, railway, and for the assimilation of the Indigenous population. Here the decreasing bison population and the smallpox epidemic played a role, as many Indigenous people who lived on the prairies were in need of help. Under the treaties, in return for the surrender of land, there was a clause guaranteeing peace with the duty of providing reserve land, hunting and fishing rights, along with annuities. Treaty number 7, the land on which this study takes place, was signed in 1877. It

²⁹ Bill Waiser, *Saskatchewan: A New History* (Calgary: Fifth House, 2005), 46.

³⁰ Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, 41.

covered the nearly ten thousand Blackfoot, Blood, Peigan, Sarcee, and Stoney Indians in southern Alberta.³¹

After the establishment of reserves, the Canadian government began the process of assimilation. Under the Indian Act, the Indian agent had a great deal of authority over the reserve, while the Christian church had a similar control over schools. The state and church worked together to eliminate the traditional way of life of Indigenous people by replacing it with agriculture and stock raising. However, as reserves were often on marginal land these attempts rarely succeeded, necessitating the procurement of supplies from farmers and ranchers. By the 1880s, the Canadian government was purchasing beef from the Territory's large ranches that had been set up using a leased land system. These contracts helped to keep money out of the pockets of Montana ranchers, but were often inadequately filled for the Indigenous population who, through treaty, were owed annuities. Between 1870 and 1885 the Indigenous majority on the north-western prairies became a dominated minority. In many ways the loss of Indigenous control over their land began with the 1869 smallpox outbreak, and much like in Montana led to their relegation to reserves leaving the grasslands open to ranchers, farmers, and settlers.

Bison and Cattle

Prior to European settlement bison were the dominant grazer on the Great Plains, including the north-western plains of Montana and Alberta. The habits of these animals altered the plant and animal life through their grazing, physical disturbance, nutrient cycling and seed dispersal.³² Following their near extinction they were replaced with cattle in the latter half of the

³¹ Hall, *From Treaties to Reserves*, 48.

³² Michael T. Kohl et al., "Bison versus Cattle: Are They Ecologically Synonymous?," *Rangeland Ecology and Management* 66, no. 6 (November, 2013): 721.

nineteenth century. This was ecologically significant as bison and cattle demonstrate fundamental differences in their ecology and interaction with the grasslands. Several studies have shown that cattle spend more time grazing than bison. A 2013 comparative study demonstrated that cattle spend twice as much time grazing as bison. Importantly, “Cattle at both sites demonstrated a strong selection for water resources and low elevations...Cattle...avoided steep slopes...”³³ Cattle diet is more varied than bison because they browse and select forbs as well as grasses. Bison, however, prefer grasses and sedges and were more prone to feed in open spaces than cattle.³⁴ Bison diet is less varied than cattle, which results in an increase in biodiversity. By over-selecting the dominant grass species and avoiding forbs bison can direct additional resources to forbs.³⁵ As bison spend less time grazing and standing near water sources their impact zone is less significant than cattle, even in similar numbers. In these ways, bison were beneficial as grazers to a mixed-grass environment.

Considering the scope of this study, one of the most important distinctions between the two species is cold tolerance and winter grazing. Bison are far more cold tolerant than cattle due to their low metabolic rate, better insulation, and very low critical temperature. Despite having cloven hooves and short legs bison are also well adapted to winter grazing. Using their large heads and strong neck muscles they are able to clear snow off of pasture in order to graze during winter months. Cattle do not have either adaptation and are forced to try and move snow away with their mouth, a process often referred to as “muzzling.”³⁶ While “muzzling” is somewhat

³³ Kohl et al., “Bison versus Cattle”, 726.

³⁴ Alan A. Steuter and Lori Hiding, “Comparative Ecology of Bison and Cattle on Mixed-Grass Prairie,” *Great Plains Research* 9, no. 2 (Fall, 1999): 332.

³⁵ Steuter, “Comparative Ecology of Bison and Cattle”, 332.

³⁶ Steuter, “Comparative Ecology of Bison and Cattle”, 331.

effective in good years, when there is deep or crusted over snow they struggle to find sufficient feed. As a result, bison are far better adapted to winter than cattle.

The Texas Ranching System

Terry Jordan's *Trails to Texas: Southern Roots of Western Cattle Ranching*, "The Origin of Anglo-American Cattle Ranching in Texas: A Documentation of Diffusion from the Lower South", and *North American Cattle Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion, and Differentiation* argue that ranching began in the American southeast and transitioned into Texas and further north.³⁷ Despite moving into new bioregions the diffusion process included the continued application of established ranching methods, technology and strategies for land use. As these methods, strategies and technologies were developed in the southeastern United States, by the mid-1880s it was determined they were not compatible with the semi-arid Great Plains and ranchers were forced to adapt. In Montana and Alberta the importation of ranching methods that were not suitable for the north-western plains, coupled with misleading booster information, made disasters all but guaranteed. Therefore, the purpose here is to establish a framework that includes the use of inappropriate ranching methods in Montana and Alberta, often referred to as the "Texas system", in order to fully explain decline and adaptation processes.

The origin of open range stock raising, the Texas ranching system, has been a subject of debate by historians and historical geographers. It has been argued that cattle ranching and its concomitant methods were adopted intact from Hispanic cultures in the early nineteenth

³⁷ Terry Jordan, *Trails to Texas: Southern Roots of Western Cattle Ranching* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981); Jordan, "The Origin of Anglo-American Cattle Ranching in Texas: A Documentation of Diffusion from the Lower South," *Economic Geography* 45, no. 1 (1969).

century.³⁸ Terry Jordan however, following in the footsteps of Frederick Jackson Turner, regards the Texas ranching system as a logical adaptation to the frontier economy and environment.³⁹ Considering that interaction with the Great Plains environment was an ongoing series of adaptations Jordan's argument makes the best sense. However, for this study the question of how the Texas system came to the north-western prairies is less important than what it was, and why it was employed by Montana and Alberta cattlemen.

Open range cattle ranching existed in Texas as early as the 1830s and had several specific characteristics. In "Origin and Distribution of Open-Range Cattle Ranching" Terry Jordan succinctly sums up the Texas system stating, "There was much besides the absence of fenced pastures that made open-range ranching distinctive, including round-ups, branding, large-scale of operation, overland drives to market, careless treatment of livestock, and uncontrolled breeding."⁴⁰ While the absence of fencing is clear enough the other aspects of the Texas system require additional explanation. The practice of rounding-up cattle and then branding them was common in Texas by the 1840s. The process was straight forward, which suited the early industry. Cattle were rounded up on horseback and driven into pens where, using a hot-iron, a symbol of ownership was burned into their hide. Initially, Anglo ranchers chose upper case letters for their brand, the letter usually coincided with the rancher's surname. This was to differentiate their cattle from Hispanic ranchers who relied on numbers or symbols.⁴¹ Brands and other marks denoting ownership were registered and published in the local newspaper to prevent

³⁸ Sandra L. Myers, "The Ranching Frontier: Spanish Institutional Backgrounds of the Plains Cattle Industry," *Essays on the American West* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969).

³⁹ Jordan, "The Origin of Anglo-American Cattle Ranching in Texas".

⁴⁰ Terry Jordan, "Origin and Distribution of Open Range Cattle Ranching," *Social Science Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (June, 1972): 105.

⁴¹ Terry Jordan, "Northeast Texas and the Evolution of Western Ranching," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 67, no. 1 (March, 1977): 76.

theft. However, it was not uncommon for unscrupulous ranchers to alter a brand so that it could not be recognized. Legendary Texas ranch, the XIT, was said to have designed their brand so that it could not be altered, thereby protecting their cattle spread across three million acres.⁴² This was not true, yet the fact that the legend persisted indicates how important branding was to ranchers using the Texas system.

Before widespread railway penetration into the west, ranchers drove their cattle overland to distant markets. The cattle drive was an iconic feature of the Texas system, yet initially it hampered the growth of the range cattle industry. Many ranchers who drove their cattle faced the dual challenges of predators and raids from Indigenous people. As a result, local markets were extremely important. For most ranchers in Alberta the primary market was the government, who purchased cattle to feed Indigenous people forced onto reservations.⁴³ In boom states like Montana, the most important markets were government contracts and mining towns that grew around gold strikes. The cattle drive was a relatively simple process, albeit very difficult. Herds were driven by men on horseback overland to their destination. The trip was long and dusty and cattle often arrived at their new pastures, or point of embarkation, footsore and weak. As a result, a crucial aspect of the cattle drive was timing. If a drive started too late in the summer cattle did not have the time or energy to acclimate to their new surroundings and regain their strength before winter. An egregious example of a poorly timed cattle drive was Texas to Tongue River by the Matador Land and Cattle Company in 1881. The company drove 5,000 cattle late in the summer, all of which died that winter.⁴⁴ Despite its iconic status the cattle drive was not an

⁴² J. Evetts Haley, *The XIT Ranch of Texas and the Early Days of the Llano Estacado* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1929), 122.

⁴³ Jordan, "Northeast Texas and the Evolution of Western Ranching," 78.

⁴⁴ Robert Fletcher, *From Free Grass to Fences* (New York: University Publishers, 1961), 53.

ancillary feature of the Texas system. Ranchers in Montana and Alberta were using the Texas system to manage their animals long after railways were accessible.

Careless treatment of livestock and uncontrolled breeding are interconnected and best explained together. The Texas system evolved on the warm coastal prairies of Louisiana where it inherited Hispanic traditions while moving to the open grasslands of Texas. A result of the geography and Hispanic influences was leaving animals alone to care for themselves. The practice originated in a sub-tropical region where the climate was amiable and herds could thrive left to their own devices.⁴⁵ As ranchers moved onto the open grasslands of Texas, and eventually Montana and Alberta, they continued to let cattle roam free, as they had always done. The treatment of cattle was not necessarily careless, but a certain amount of neglect was inherent in the Texas system. An unavoidable aspect of letting cattle loose to fend for themselves was uncontrolled breeding. However, for early ranchers breed control was not important. The reason was, early ranchers were not breeding for meat quality, cold tolerance, or docility, as these were unnecessary for what was essentially wild stock. Furthermore, controlled breeding would have been impractical in a fenceless operation. The lack of fences and uncontrolled breeding are two definitive characteristics of the Texas system. For ranchers in Montana and Alberta both of these features proved especially problematic as they adapted to the north-western plains.

The Great Plains looked attractive to Anglo-Texas ranchers despite being very different from the southern lands they had previously known. The vast plains of Texas were far drier and cooler than the humid, sub-tropical region where the Texas system was engendered. Despite these ecological differences, very few adaptations to the Texas system were made as cattle

⁴⁵ Terry Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion, and Differentiation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 210.

ranching moved north. By the 1860s the Texas system had moved beyond the North Platte into the Saskatchewan bioregion where wheat and needle grasses were common, along with grama and buffalo grass. However, ranchers remained ignorant of the region's semi-aridity due to a period of prolonged wetness and the rapid proliferation of booster material for cattle ranching.⁴⁶ As the Texas system extended into Montana and Alberta during the 1870s and 1880s climate factors would force ranchers to challenge their misperception of the environment and adapt the Texas system to a drier and cooler bioregion.

Historiography

Cattle ranching in Canada and the United States has a long history of scholarship at the highest level. Frederick Jackson Turner wrote "The effect of these great ranches on the subsequent agrarian history of the localities in which they existed should be studied"⁴⁷. This endorsement of the range cattle industry's importance spurred many historians to look at the economic and social importance of ranching on the Great Plains. For example, Earnest Staples Osgood, Terry Jordan, Max Foran, Warren Elofson, Simon Evans, and Edward Brado have all written excellent histories of the industry generally.⁴⁸ However, popularity for this topic has dramatically declined over the last 30 years. As a consequence, few scholars have approached this topic from an environmental perspective.

Environmental historiography is an important component to this study. Historians such as Geoff Cunfer, Brian Donahue, and Jim Sherow have all challenged environmental history's

⁴⁶ Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers*", 223.

⁴⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: H. Holt, 1923), 23.

⁴⁸ Ernest Staples Osgood, *The Day of the Cattleman* (University of Minnesota Press, 1929); Terry G. Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion, and Differentiation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993); Warren M. Elofson, *Gentlemen, Cowboys, and Cattle Thieves: Ranching on the Western Frontier, 1870 -1914* (Montreal: McGill, 2000); Simon M. Evans, "The Origin of Ranching in Western Canada: American Diffusion or Victorian Transplant?," *Great Plains Quarterly* 3, no.2 (1983): 79-91; Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*.

tendency toward decline narratives by arguing that human interaction with the environment is not inherently negative.⁴⁹ This study will contribute to that historiography by arguing ranchers in Alberta and Montana fundamentally misunderstood their environment. Their misperception led to their importation of ranching methods that were inappropriate for their bioregion causing ranges to be overstocked and underequipped. When a drought and especially difficult winter struck in 1886/1887, ranchers on both sides of the border lost thousands of animals. However, many ranchers, especially those who lost stock, started to grasp the limitations of their environment and made changes to their ranching methods. Where this study fits within environmental historiography is its discussion of misperception leading to adaptation. What this challenges is the overall decline narrative and hostility to ranchers as rapacious capitalists who cared little for their environment.

This study examines five ranches, two in Montana and three in Alberta, within their environmental and political context.⁵⁰ All of these ranches were capitalized in a period of expansion and overwhelming optimism for the cattle industry. For Canada, optimism was coupled with the emergence of both British and local markets for beef.⁵¹ In Montana local markets were comprised of miners, small settlements and Indigenous people. These markets, coupled with encroaching railways to Chicago and other shipping hubs, contributed to the rapid growth of Montana ranches.⁵² For both areas, availability of markets was essential.

⁴⁹ Geoff Cunfer, *On the Great Plains: Agriculture and Environment* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004); Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Jim Sherow, "Workings of the Geodialectic: High Plains Indians and their Horses in the Region of the Arkansas River Valley, 1800-1870," *Environmental History Review* 16, no.2 (1992): 61-84.

⁵⁰ Evans, "The Origin of Ranching in Western Canada," 79-91.

⁵¹ Simon Evans, "Canadian Beef for Victorian Britain," *Agricultural History* 53, no. 4 (October, 1979): 748-762.

⁵² Michael P. Malone and Richard B. Roeder, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979), 111.

Ranching historiography, and environmental history generally, tends to follow a decline narrative. The most common historical framework for cattle ranchers during the boom period argues that they moved into an unspoiled area in the 1870s and 1880s and, due to their greed, overstocked the grasslands causing economic and environmental damage.⁵³ Essentially, ranchers depleted their ranges until an environmental disaster was unavoidable. This study, however, deviates from that historiography. The argument here is that the disaster was a natural one enabled by a misunderstood environment. In the wake of the 1886/1887 disaster, ranchers adapted their methods to avoid further loss of stock and capital. Ranchers did not solve their environment as several other disasters plagued the industry through the 1890s and early 1900s. However, primary source evidence indicates that ranchers did learn, and were engaged in, changing their methods in order to fit within the confines of their environment. As a consequence, the narrative here does not follow a decline framework. This study includes the argument that ranchers were adapting to an environment about which they had been misled. Examining the motivation of ranchers and their adaptations to the environment constitutes a major historiographical contribution of this study.

The geographic focus for this study is the north-western plains borderlands of Montana and Alberta. The logic for this scope is that ranchers in this area were exposed to the same plethora of misleading booster information regarding their environment. The region also has a similar climate and grasslands on both sides of the border.⁵⁴ The result of the regional similarities was a shared culture of misperception and inadequate ranching methods followed by adaptation.

⁵³ Osgood, *The Day of the Cattleman*; Warren M. Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2009); Warren M. Elofson, *Frontier Cattle Ranching in the Land and Times of Charlie Russell* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 2004); Michael Malone and Richard Roeder, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*.

⁵⁴ Sterling Evans, eds., *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests: Essays on Regional History of the Forty-Ninth Parallel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 17-45.

This study is a Northern Great Plains environmental history of the Montana and Alberta borderlands as well as a ranching history. A close examination of the challenges faced by operations in Alberta and Montana will shed light on historical interaction with the environmental limitations on both sides of the 49th parallel.

Historian Jim Sherow noted that understanding environmental perception and adaptation to the environment are important lessons environmental historians can teach. The north-western plains was subject to severe fluctuation in both precipitation and temperature. As a consequence, this bioregion was a non-equilibrium area that required adaptation for successful interaction.⁵⁵ This study discusses adaptation through a decline and progress framework based on interaction with the environment. This method for analysis relies on clear evidence that ranchers, and those who were allied with the industry, were learning from their missteps and gaining a more nuanced understanding of their environment. Primary evidence that directly challenges booster material is of particular importance. Strategies employed by the ranching industry, including the diversification of investments, followed the so-called hard winter of 1886/1887. These strategies indicated adaptation to the bioregion. However, understanding an environment was a slow process and ranchers would continue to adapt as new, and unexpected, environmental obstacles occurred.

Decline and Progressive Narrative Historiography

North American environmental history tends to fall into two dominant frameworks. William Cronon's 1993 article "A Place for Stories: Nature, History and Narrative" describes these as either "progressive" or "declensionist."⁵⁶ The frameworks are descriptors of how human

⁵⁵ Geoff Cunfer, *On the Great Plains*.

⁵⁶ William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History and Narrative," *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (1992): 1347-1376.

interaction with the environment is interpreted. Therefore, each requires both political and theoretical structure which tie them to environmental historiography in general. The irony of these frameworks is that they have very little to do with the environment in and of itself. What they tend to represent are broader trends of environmental interpretation and discourse and are, therefore, categories that indicate culture. Anxieties over global warming, pollution, resource access and scarcity have made the decline framework far more common. While it is important to recognize humanity's missteps with the environment, focusing on an environmental low-point is problematic. By not recognizing that adaptation often follows decline the impression is that humans are an inherently destructive force. Such an interpretation does not tell the story in its entirety.

A declensionist environmental history begins with the important question: when does interaction become degradation? As a consequence, the temporal framework begins with a pristine environment and ends with a degraded one. The lesson is that humanity, through greed, degraded the natural world in order to make a profit. The majority of ranching historiography in Alberta and Montana follows this framework. Ranches were started in an ideal environment, overstocked to maximize profits during a boom and degraded as a result. The problems faced by the ranching industry are often blamed on ranchers for degrading their environment. In combination these two factors make the decline narrative seem obvious. However, by considering that boosters were inaccurately representing the environment and ranchers tried to adapt after their failures, the framework starts to break down.

Donald Worster's *Dust Bowl* popularized the decline framework for North American environmental history. Worster argues that the Great Plains ecosystem was a stable, albeit fragile, arrangement between its low rainfall and short grasses. When White settlers moved to the

region they ploughed up the grass and planted wheat at a “rapacious” rate in order to exploit a booming market. The result of White settler’s mismanagement was keenly felt during the 1930s. The over-ploughing meant that the soil was no longer anchored by the grass. During concurrent years of long drought, great black blizzards formed causing economic and environmental hardship. The iconic black blizzards were a powerful rebuke of capitalism and a symbol of humanity’s mismanagement of the natural world. It was only through government intervention, education and reform that the Great Plains could be saved from further ecological disaster.⁵⁷ According to Worster “The Dust Bowl...was the inevitable outcome of a culture that deliberately, self-consciously, set itself that task of dominating and exploiting the land for all its worth.”⁵⁸ The Great Plains, to Worster, were doomed. Worster’s influence is evident in Richard White’s *Land Use, Environment and Social Change* in that capitalist interaction with the environment inevitably lead to degradation.⁵⁹ White used Island County, Washington as a case study to argue that while Indigenous people altered their environment through fire they did not inherently damage it. White then argues that the introduction of European peoples, plants, animals and methods led to large scale environmental degradation.⁶⁰ Both White and Worster are important environmental historians. However, by focusing on mistakes and ending their analysis at an environmental low point, they have not told the entire story. What makes this study historiographically unique is the focus on improvement after the decline.

Three important studies for understanding the interrelationship between humans, grasslands, and economics have been written by William Dobak, Andrew Isenberg, and George

⁵⁷ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁵⁸ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 4.

⁵⁹ Richard White, *Land Use, Environment and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980).

⁶⁰ Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport: Greenwood, 1972).

Colpitts. William Dobak's article⁶¹ and Andrew Isenberg's book⁶² both outline how environmental exploitation by Amerindians on both sides of the Canada/U.S. border led to the near destruction of a species. In *Pemmican Empire: Food, Trade, and the Last Bison Hunts in the North American Plains 1780-1882* Colpitts' argues how Indigenous and Metis peoples and fur traders responded to the pemmican trade in Canada.⁶³ It must be noted that in all cases Amerindians were responding to an economic opportunity provided by European settlers. While this study does not examine the bison it relies upon a similar historiography, especially Colpitts. A goal for this study is to demonstrate a strong connection between environment and 19th century economics.

A declensionist argument, especially as it relates to rapacious greed being the reason for environmental degradation, is problematic for this study. Much of the evidence presented here, for example, boosters, imported ranching methods, and the recovery period, directly challenge a decline framework. It will be demonstrated, cattle ranchers made numerous improvements, and attempts at improvement, in the wake of several environmentally driven disasters. Furthermore, the decline framework, especially as employed by Worster, asserts that the only real interpretation of environment can come from knowledgeable outsiders. Local farmers (in *Dust Bowl*) were rapacious capitalists who could not see the damage they had caused. As a consequence, it was only outsiders who could interpret, and then solve, the actual problems with the environment. Due to this study's reliance on misinformation from outsiders, and problems with absentee management, the idea that outsiders were more knowledgeable than locals is

⁶¹ William A. Dobak, "Killing the Canadian Buffalo, 1821-1881," *Western Historical Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (1996): 33-52.

⁶² Andrew Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁶³ George Colpitts, *Pemmican Empire: Food, Trade, and the Last Bison Hunts in the North American Plains 1780-1882* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

demonstrably false. The popularity of the decline narrative has made North American environmental discourse unsympathetic to ranchers. This study challenges that historiography by arguing that they were not rapacious capitalists and were engaged in adapting, even when those adaptations hurt their bottom line or were unsuccessful.

On the other side of the historiographical spectrum is the progressive framework. This narrative, according to Cronon, begins with either a “waste-land” or a “wasted land” depending the presence or absence of Indigenous people. The story then moves on to the settlement of farmers who, through ingenuity and adaptation, turn land that was wasted into productive agricultural space. The process of turning waste-land into productive agricultural space is the basis of the progressive narrative.⁶⁴ Historiographically, this narrative traces its roots to Frederick Jackson Turner’s seminal lecture “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.”⁶⁵ Turner argued that the frontier had been closed through progressive American settlement beginning with ranchers and ending with cities. Turner’s frontier thesis revolutionized American history. However, he has been legitimately criticized for being determinist and overtly racist. These criticisms were then linked to the progressive narrative in general. Turner would never really be resurrected but later scholars, like James Sherow, Warren Elofson, Brian Donahue, and Geoff Cunfer would successfully argue that human interaction with the land is not inherently destructive.

James Sherow’s 1992 article “Workings of the Geodialectic: High Plains Indians and their Horses in the Region of the Arkansas River Valley, 1800-1870” made the argument for a holistic interpretation of man’s interaction with nature.⁶⁶ The term geodialectic describes the

⁶⁴ Cronon, “A Place for Stories.”

⁶⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: H. Holt, 1923).

⁶⁶ Sherow, “Workings of the Geodialectic.”

interaction between living and non-living forces. He suggests that the natural world plays a role in both adaptation and culture; therefore, man can adapt to nature and operate within its limits. However, this also means that man cannot go beyond the constraints of nature. Success within a geodialectical framework, therefore, is based on long term continuity of culture, activity and adaptive strategies.⁶⁷ For cattle ranchers on the north-western plains the constraints of nature were evident almost immediately. However, as those same constraints had been completely ignored by boosters ranchers had not prepared and their stock suffered the consequences. The analysis in this study of how ranchers negotiated between what they thought of their environment and what it actually was owes a debt to Sherow's framework.

Sherow's geodialectical framework drew on James Malin's *History and Ecology*.⁶⁸

James Malin was trained as both an historian and biologist and has been published in both disciplines. Malin advocated a melding of history and science and was an outspoken critic of the "ecosystem equilibrium/climax" theory. This theory argues that ecosystems, if left alone, will seek an internal balance. Malin countered this by arguing that ecosystems were always in flux and therefore were never in balance. This idea challenged the dominant narrative for the New Deal and the teleological narrative for environmental progression. What Sherow adopted from Malin was the idea that nature interacts with humans as much as the other way around. Cattle ranchers who lived through the drought of 1886 and the winter of 1886/1887 on the north-western plains would likely agree. Both Malin and Sherow's frameworks suggest that human interaction was not inherently negative, although not benign. Furthermore, a framework for

⁶⁷ Sherow, "Workings of the Geodialectic."

⁶⁸ James Malin, *History and Ecology: Studies of the Grassland* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

understanding a positive interaction with the environment could be based on a learned understanding of environmental limits followed by adaptation.

Brian Donahue, like Sherow, argues that human interaction with the natural world is not inherently negative. In his study *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord* he examines the history of mixed husbandry in colonial New England. Donahue argues that New England farmers developed a mosaic farming method that was both productive and sustainable.⁶⁹ This method relied on a common grazing area, mixed crops, forest fringe gathering, some animal husbandry and mixed cottage industries. Mixed farming was ecologically stable, but New England farmers were still protected by an ecological safety net created through diversification. Furthermore, population levels were sustainable as a mixed farm leads to later marriages and fewer children. The final chapter of Donahue's study, however, argues that 19th century capitalist farming methods undermined this system making it unsustainable. One of the adaptive strategies for ranchers was to create a safety net through diversification. Ranchers invested in allied industries, ran sheep in areas where cattle were not profitable, cut hay for feed and maintained ranges in several different locations. This study adds to the overall environmental historiography by expanding the idea of the ecological safety net to Alberta and Montana ranchers.

In particular, this study owes a historiographical debt to Geoff Cunfer's *On The Great Plains*.⁷⁰ Cunfer's work, as a direct challenge to Donald Worster, defends the idea that ranchers on the Great Plains could achieve a "temporary equilibrium" with their environment.⁷¹ A "temporary equilibrium" was attained when, for a time, ranchers adapted their methods to fit

⁶⁹ Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁷⁰ Cunfer, *On the Great Plains*.

⁷¹ Cunfer, *On the Great Plains*.

within the constraints of their environment. What constitutes the temporary aspect was that the northern Great Plains was always changing making continuous adaptation a necessity. Simply put, adjustments are made and then more adjustments are made. If a balance, or near balance, is struck then the enterprise is successful. It is the continuous negotiation between rancher and environment that substantiates two important arguments in this study. First, ranchers were ignorant of their environment due to misleading, although believable, booster information. Second, while imported methods of range management could lead to a temporary equilibrium they were inappropriate for the north-western plains.

During the 1880s land in Alberta was parceled into large ranges and leased to wealthy investors while in Montana the vast majority of stock-growers relied on the open, and free, range. Despite this difference, both regions would initially import the Texas system where cattle were allowed to range free. The concept of ranching methods diffusing from south to north is based on Terry Jordan's "Early Northeast Texas and the Evolution of Western Ranching." Jordan traces how cattle ranching methods in the south were characterized by cattle being able to graze on their own for the entire year and despite that winter did see some cattle becoming "poor", there were apparently no major die-offs.⁷² Cattle ranchers who were looking north for new pastures after the Civil War brought this ranching method with them. A significant reason for this was booster representations of the Montana grasslands in pamphlets, newspapers and two influential books; James Brisbin's *The Beef Bonanza; or How to Get Rich on the Plains* and Robert Strahorn's *Montana and Yellowstone National Park*. Brisbin's booster representations were numerous and enthusiastic. He noted that "It is, however, as a stock-growing region

⁷² Terry Jordan, "Early Northeast Texas and the Evolution of Western Ranching." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 67, no. 1 (March, 1977): 67-69.

Montana surpasses all other sections of our great west. Its grasses cure naturally on the ground, and even in winter cattle and sheep, which run out all the year round, are found fat and fit and ready for the butcher's block."⁷³ The profits to be made were enticing to investors as well. The *Breeders Gazette* wrote that a steer purchased for \$5 could be sold after two years of eating free grass for \$45-\$60, while Brisbin placed the value of all 160,647 cattle in Montana at \$1,812,920.⁷⁴ While these representations of climate and profits sound beyond belief, it is important to note that for most people of the period they seemed realistic.

In the absence of long term interaction with the land, recent migrant's perception of their new environment came from what information was available. For the north-western plains in the 19th century that information was provided by government, booster pamphlets and newspapers. During the 19th century the west was depicted to Canadians, Americans and Europeans as a ranching Eden. This inaccurate perception of the environment had several interrelated effects. Western migrants were unprepared for the actual environment. This engendered disasters and drove adaptation. For this study, disaster followed by adaptation, even when unsuccessful, required a framework that includes both decline and progress. The decline period is where ranching was not compatible with the environment. The use of the Texas system coupled with the drought and hard winter of 1886/1887 being the most prominent example. The progress period is where rancher's methods were changed based on a better understanding of environmental limits.

The decline framework is dominant in contemporary ranching historiography. Historians tend to look at the failures of the industry and the fact that it was backed by capital from eastern

⁷³ James Brisbin, *The Beef Bonanza; or How to Get Rich on the Plains* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1881), 167.

⁷⁴ Brisbin, *Beef Bonanza*, 167.

Canada, America, or Europe and come to the same conclusion as Worster. This study's reliance on Sherow, Elofson, Donahue, and Cunfer's frameworks to describe how culture and adaptation can allow for an "accidental equilibrium" adds value to ranching and environmental historiography. This is not done by absolving ranchers, but, by looking at how they tried to operate in an environment they fundamentally did not understand.

Borderlands and Boosters Historiography

Borderlands historiography is usually equated with the Spanish borderlands, particularly those located in what later became the Southwestern United States. The focus for these studies is often cultural conflict and violence.⁷⁵ Considering the focus and geography, an important aspect of borderlands historiography deals with expansion. Expansion is often portrayed as a belligerent land grab prompted by concerns over land access, commerce and security. In southern borderlands historiography expansion offered more than material gains; it offered opportunity, identity, liberty, democracy and fulfilled the republican vision. The northern borderlands between Alberta and Montana, however, has been neglected despite fitting much of this criteria. The overall academic neglect of this region adds to the historiographical value of this study.

An early and important borderlands study of Montana and Alberta was Paul F. Sharp's, *Whoop-Up Country: The Canadian-American West, 1865-1885*. Central to Sharp's argument was a shared regional history. Sharp notes that merchants from Fort Benton, Montana were significant to the early years of the cattle industry in both Montana and Alberta. The scope of Sharp's study runs north from Fort Benton, across the 49th parallel, and ends near Fort McLeod,

⁷⁵ Herbert E. Bolton, *Bolton and the Spanish Borderlands* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1920); Verner R. Crane, *The Southern Frontier 1670-1732* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1929).

Alberta making it historiographically significant for this study.⁷⁶ However, scope is where the similarities end. Sharp's history is firmly rooted in the historiography of the 1950s, and despite being well researched and written, is lacking in environmental analysis. Furthermore, what Sharp was ultimately arguing for is a nascent regional identity that, sixty-two years since publication, has not emerged. Nevertheless, this study will build on the geographic region established by Sharp and add to the growing number of sophisticated borderlands histories of the region.

In "Montana Business and Canadian Regionalism in the 1870s and 1880s" James M. Francis challenges the idea that it was the Canadian Pacific Railroad that "Canadianized" the west. He argues that other scholars, like Breen, Sharp and Harold Innis, over-stated the effect the railroad had "forming the social bond between the Canadian Prairies and eastern Canada."⁷⁷ Francis argues that the T.C. Power and I.G. Baker firms, through their business and political activity, had already brought Canadian goods to the west. It was their presence in helping to establish a borderlands economic region that forged the first links between eastern and western Canada. Historiographically, this was an invaluable source for the borderlands component of this study. However, there are distinct differences between this study and the one by Francis that warrant attention. First, this study argues that both Power and Baker were boosters for the west. In all probability, their boosterism was tied to their economic interest. However, it was important because Power and Baker's success reinforced booster representations of western economic potential. Second, they supported Canadian institutions, like the North West Mounted Police, because they were a market for their mercantile business to exploit. Last, with respect to the

⁷⁶ Paul Sharp, *Whoop-Up Country: The Canadian and American West, 1865-1885* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955).

⁷⁷ James M. Francis, "Regional Ideas and the Montana-Alberta Borderlands in the 1870s and 1880s," *Western Historical Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (1981): 291-292.

cattle industry, it was the borderlands economic region that allowed for the rapid stocking of Alberta ranches starting in 1881. Had the Power, Baker and other firms not been operating in Montana, ranchers in Alberta could not have stocked their ranges with thousands of cattle overnight. It was the rapidity with which Alberta ranchers stocked their ranges that reflected both their faith in booster representations of the environment and their faith in the Texas system. While Francis makes a solid case for their role in Canadianizing the west prior to the railroad, he does not spend much time on the environmental repercussions of a vibrant cross-border cattle trade. In that sense, this study adds to the borderlands economic and environmental historiography of Alberta and Montana.

The overarching historiography of the Montana/Alberta borderlands were examined in “Regional Ideas and the Montana-Alberta Borderlands in the 1870s and 1880s” by geographer Peter S. Morris. In his abstract he noted that the borderlands concept had not often been applied to the northwestern Great Plains except for Sharp and a few others.⁷⁸ However, he also notes that the study of the region has gained some ground “despite a late start...”⁷⁹ Morris argues that borderlands, as an academic exercise, seeks to erase political borders and emphasize a shared culture that exists on both sides of the line.⁸⁰ David Breen and Robert Fletcher, in cultural studies of ranching in Alberta and Montana respectively, emphasized differences between the two cultures. Alberta ranching culture was conservative, British and connected to government. Montana ranchers are portrayed as rugged individualists who resisted any and all government

⁷⁸ Peter S. Morris, “Regional Ideas and the Montana-Alberta Borderlands,” *The Geographical Review* 89, no. 4 (1999): 469.

⁷⁹ Morris, “Regional Ideas,” 469.

⁸⁰ Morris, “Regional Ideas,” 470.

regulation.⁸¹ This study, however, will discuss the cultural similarities resulting from misperception and the importation of ranching methods that were inappropriate.

Morris is skeptical when describing the possibility of extending a borderlands analysis to the entire Great Plains; however, he does acknowledge that the Alberta/Montana borderlands is promising in this respect. He argues that the environment of the entire Great Plains is too varied to generate a regional identity. This is apt, the Great Plains varies in elevation by more than 3,000 feet and includes flat prairie, badlands, rolling hills and desert. Such a wide variation engenders regional industries as opposed to a broad culture.⁸² What Morris does advocate for in Great Plains borderlands scholarship are small scale, regional studies like *Whoop-Up County*. The scope of this study is focused on the environmentally and economically homogenous borderlands extending from the Fort Benton, Montana to Calgary, Alberta. The role of misinformation and environmental ignorance examined here will add valuable environmental context to the emerging historiography described by Morris.

One of the most prominent recent borderlands scholars is Sterling Evans. He is the author or editor for two studies that are of particular importance to this work. The 2006 collection *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests: Essays on Regional History of the Forty-Ninth Parallel* is an invaluable historiographic resource. In particular the discussion by Theodore Binnema provided further justification for the scope of this study. In Binnema's chapter he argues that it is not just complex social and economic ties that bind the Alberta and Montana borderlands, but a shared bioregion as well. This study adds to Binnema's argument by noting

⁸¹ Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West and the Ranching Frontier, 1874-1924* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983).

⁸² Morris, "Regional Ideas," 471.

that not only is there a shared bioregion but it was misunderstood for similar reasons on both sides of the 49th parallel. The argument in this study, therefore, adds to Binnema's insights.

Sterling Evans' *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950* fleshed out the interconnectivity of agricultural products in a broadly conceived borderlands framework.⁸³ While this study does not have the geographical scope of *Bound in Twine*, the interplay of environment, borderlands, and economics argued by Evans was invaluable for connecting those strands for cattle ranching in Alberta and Montana. Evans' geographic framework for a different, yet similar, industry helps to situate this study within borderlands historiography generally.

During the latter half of the 19th century booster literature was as much a part of the west as bison. Promotional literature has been produced for most places at most points in time, in that way booster literature was not unique to the west in the latter half of the nineteenth century. However, western booster literature at this time was particularly persuasive because of its ubiquity and it was produced during a period of optimism. In the midst of the shift from agrarian to industrial economies, western promoters saw an unrealistic future and announced its presence long before it arrived. Promoters of the cattle industry, like James Brisbin, did their utmost to imagine the west into existence through embellished descriptions of easy money and an ideal climate. In doing so, promoters influenced the perception of western places for residents and the perceptions that eastern residents had of western places.⁸⁴

⁸³ Sterling Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007).

⁸⁴ David M. Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 2.

Max Foran noted of boosters that, “The rhetoric of progress was proclaimed the loudest in publications produced by business organizations or political bodies.”⁸⁵ Producers of booster materials were local newspapers, commercial clubs, local and state-level chambers of commerce, immigration societies, boards of agriculture, real estate speculators, writers for railroads (cattle ranching promoter Robert Strahorn wrote for the Union Pacific), and colonization societies.⁸⁶ Business and political organizations who were local had an emotional attachment to the place they were promoting, along with an economic aim. This type of booster is referred to as an “inside” promoter. In a sense, inside promoters were lauding their hometown in order to ensure its survival. T.C. Power and I.G. Baker, working as promoters for Fort Benton, Montana are a good example of inside boosters. Meanwhile, “outside” boosters did not have an emotional attachment and were selling the west as a commodity. Federally produced promotional material predominantly falls into the “outside” category.⁸⁷

Booster literature, often booklets and pamphlets, cost only postage and were often shipped at the cost of the author. The majority were printed in English, however literature destined for Europe was printed in the language of those countries from which immigrants or money was being solicited. State, province, or country level promotional literature was financed by government, railroads, and chambers of commerce. The volume of booster literature produced was truly staggering; “they were printed in lots of 10,000, 15,000, or even 20,000 or 30,000 per year... These materials were generally updated every year or two.”⁸⁸ As a result, for most of the latter half of the nineteenth century there would have been millions of western promotional

⁸⁵ Max Foran, “THE BOOSTERS IN BOOSTERISM: SOME CALGARY EXAMPLES,” *Urban History Review* 8, no. 2 (October 1979): 77.

⁸⁶ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 3.

⁸⁷ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 7.

⁸⁸ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 3.

materials in circulation. Historian David Wroble notes that booster literature was so common in people's homes and in public spaces that it can be assumed most literate Americans had some exposure to promoter's unrealistic vision of the west.⁸⁹

Boosters contributed to both the gold rush and the rush of cattlemen onto the Great Plains. *Natures Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* by William Cronon is a sprawling environmental history of the west. Cronon notes that booster information focused on the economic relationship between cities and the country side.⁹⁰ For the ranching industry this was certainly the case. Perhaps the most well-known booster for the ranching industry was James Brisbin who wrote, *The Beef Bonanza: or, How to Get Rich on the Plains, Being a Description of Cattle-Growing, Sheep-Farming, Horse-Raising, and Dairying in the West*. Brisbin was an army officer who decided to promote the west after seeing cattlemen making their fortune. The economic opportunity stressed by Brisbin fits into Cronon's booster framework. Brisbin projected profits of 26 to 48 percent based on how much capital was invested and that "...I do not think it too high for realization."⁹¹ What is important is that Brisbin's and other booster representations of the cattle industry and the environment seemed realistic based on the overall perception of western opportunity.

Booster theories for rural prosperity emphasized two so-called "natural advantages" that fell into broad categories. The first category emphasized the natural resources of the area. For cattle ranching this included grasses, water, and climate. In his chapter about Montana, Brisbin wrote that the winters are cold yet in the in the following paragraph notes that, "The grazing cannot be excelled in any country in the world, and much of the stock runs out all the winter...In

⁸⁹ Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 3.

⁹⁰ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1991).

⁹¹ Brisbin, *Beef Bonanza*, 172.

the springtime the stock is fat...”⁹² This sentence is an especially strong endorsement for the Texas system. The second category is transportation.⁹³ While Brisbin and other authors note that Montana had no railways as of 1881, they had “many fine wagon roads” and “...boats can make two trips from St. Louis to Fort Benton and back again during the season”⁹⁴ In *Nature’s Metropolis* Cronon examined the role of boosters in urban development. For that reason the damage caused by misinformation was more economic than environmental. This study draws on Cronon’s booster framework but applies it to the development of cattle ranching and misrepresentations of the north-western plains environment.

Booster literature was incredibly formulaic, despite being applied to very different bioregions. The *Billings Herald* description of Montana, “The vast superiority of Montana’s climate and grasses over those of all other regions are demonstrated by the wonderful improvement of southern cattle after grazing,”⁹⁵ is strikingly similar to descriptions of Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas, Nebraska, Alberta, Manitoba, and California. The problem with general promotion was, after a time all regions must have seemed interchangeable. According to boosters, all regions where cattle raising was possible were also ideal. As a result, perception of Montana and Alberta’s climate to outsiders lacked nuance. Ranchers began their operation in a bioregion they fundamentally did not understand because there was very little accurate information regarding the actual climate, grasses, and water. The problem of general descriptions by boosters was twofold. First, ranchers imported the Texas system without hesitation because their bioregion had been described as being well suited to Texas style ranching. Second, ranchers

⁹² Brisbin, *Beef Bonanza*, 163.

⁹³ Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis*, 36.

⁹⁴ Brisbin, *Beef Bonanza*, 164-165.

⁹⁵ *Billings Herald*, August 11, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

would not come to a more nuanced understanding of their bioregion; that is, understanding their stock's needs in winter, the dangers of uncontrolled breeding, and the often hostile climate, until they had lived and worked there for several years. An important contribution of this study is demonstrating that ranchers learned the nuances of their climate through experience. It was not the temporary equilibrium that taught ranchers the true nature of their environment, but the catastrophic failures.⁹⁶ A nuanced perception of the environment is one that challenged the general, simplistic, and misleading booster description. Nuance therefore, included all of the negative climate events that demonstrated the lack of suitability of the Texas system for the north-western plains, along with the positive.

Ranching Historiography

Alberta ranching historiography emphasizes overstocking as the central explanation for numerous large scale stock-losses and therefore fits into a decline framework. This is problematic as it fails to address two important questions. First, it places the blame for overstocked ranges squarely on the avarice of cattlemen without considering any other possible explanation. These were experienced cattlemen and such a basic mistake seems unlikely (and is directly challenged by the primary literature). Second, if avarice was the only motivator for cattlemen why try to adapt to a bioregion that was less than ideal?

Ranching history was relatively popular until the 1970s when it tapered off due to changing historical methodologies.⁹⁷ The few recent studies that span the 1880s are declensionist and lack an argument describing how ranchers came to better understand their environment.

⁹⁶ Cunfer, *On the Great Plains*.

⁹⁷ Based on the number of publications.

Historians such as Warren Elofson, Simon Evans, Edward Brado, L.V. Kelly, and David Breen⁹⁸ have been among the primary contributors for nearly forty years. This study will address a historiographical gap in the existing Alberta ranching literature by employing an environmental and borderlands framework to a topic where that analysis is underrepresented. The historiography for ranching in Alberta has especially lacked an environmental framework until recently. The absence of environmental analyses are what situate this study within Alberta ranching historiography.

David Breen's *The Canadian Prairie West and the Ranching Frontier, 1874-1924* argues there was an important difference between the evolution and resulting culture of the Canadian and American cattle industries. While his book deals with several sub-themes, he was mostly concerned with the cultural difference between Alberta and American ranching. Essentially, Canadian cattlemen tended to be well-connected and moneyed easterners giving the Canadian cattle industry a character distinct from their American counterparts. Breen's work is insightful but lacking in areas that are fully explored in this study. Breen does not dig into the history of Montana cattle ranching culture, instead he relies on generalizations. The primary evidence for ranching in Montana indicate a number of significant similarities between Alberta and Montana ranching culture. Most importantly for this study is the shared bioregion, environmental problems, political participation, economics, ranching methods and requirement to adapt. The discussion of these similarities are unique to this study.

Edward Brado's *Cattle Kingdom* is written in a similar vein as Breen. Brado's study has a strong narrative character and is based on the rich collection of primary sources available. Where

⁹⁸ Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money*; Evans, "The Origin of Ranching in Western Canada"; Brado, *Cattle kingdom*; L.V. Kelly *The Range Men: Pioneer Ranchers of Alberta* (Toronto: W.Briggs, 1913); Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West*.

Brado excels in telling the story of ranching in Alberta during the 19th century. Where this study deviates from *Cattle Kingdom* is through the careful analysis of those same primary documents with environmental and borderlands frameworks. For example, Brado's analysis of the winter of 1886/1887, a disaster that is considered a demarcation point in Great Plains ranching historiography, is glossed over. This study looks at the years surrounding that disastrous winter to better understand why ranchers were operating and stocking their ranges using the Texas system. It also carefully examines the years following 1886/1887 to shed light on how ranchers better understood their environment.

Simon Evans is another excellent ranching historian to which this study owes a historiographical debt. In his book *The Bar U: Canadian Ranching History* he discusses, in depth, the history of that ranch from its inception.⁹⁹ Evan's study is rare in ranching historiography in that it is focused on the history of a single operation from start to finish. However, significantly, Evans uses the Bar U as a case study for the history of ranching in Alberta generally. The study is divided up chronologically as a way to better explain the ongoing development of this ranch and the industry. *The Bar U* covers a great deal of ground and was especially helpful, in a similar fashion as Sterling Evans' work, in identifying economic connections between Alberta and the rest of the world. Along with his numerous articles on the origin of the ranching industry, *The Bar U* provided excellent insights for a single ranch operating in a much wider context. The Bar U was a contemporary of the Cochrane, A7, and Walrond operations situating this study within the same historiography as Simon Evans.

⁹⁹ Simon Evans, *The Bar U: Canadian Ranching History* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004).

Warren Elofson, a prolific publisher on Canadian ranching, holds a place of particular influence in Alberta ranching historiography. In 2009 Warren Elofson published *Somebody Else's Money: The Walrond Rancho Story, 1883-1907* where he argues for an economic explanation for the poor decision making of ranch manager Duncan McEachran.¹⁰⁰ The crux of his argument is “Most of the great ranches failed because they had neither the ability nor the inclination to employ the strategies of the family farm...What follows is not an exhaustive history of the Walrond cattle ranch. It is instead the thorough discussion of the economics of the large scale grazing industry centering on that outfit.”¹⁰¹ Elofson's argument has a great deal of merit and is a great read; however, this study adds an environmental and borderlands element to the discussion. Furthermore, the inclusion of the Cochrane and the A7 Ranches enrich overall ranching historiography of Alberta. Lastly, Elofson's argument that the family farm was the ideal agricultural strategy of the northern plains is challenged by the struggle of the A7, a family farm of only a few hundred cattle, prior to and just after, 1886/87. In short, Elofson's argument in *Somebody Else's Money* lacks the environmental component provided by this study.

An additional contribution from Elofson is *So Far and Yet So Close: Frontier Cattle Ranching in Western Prairie Canada and the Northern Territory of Australia* published in 2015. This study, far more than any of the previously published ranching histories, looks at the role of a misunderstood environment as a motivator for both failure and change.¹⁰² In that respect, this study is in a similar historiographical space; however, there are several significant differences that warrant attention. As opposed to this study, which focuses on the role of the environment,

¹⁰⁰ Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money*.

¹⁰¹ Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money*, 19.

¹⁰² Warren Elofson. *So Far and Yet So Close: Frontier Cattle Ranching in Western Prairie Canada and the Northern Territory of Australia* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2015).

booster representations and adaptation after failure, Elofson's argument centered on the role of the family in keeping the ranch going. As such, he emphasized social capital in ranching historiography. Elofson's argument is comparative but does not have an economic nor a borderlands component. An important aspect to this study is the role played by the pre-existing borderlands economic region that allowed Alberta ranchers to rapidly stock their ranges with Montana cattle. Had thousands of cattle not been available for purchase in Montana, Alberta ranchers would have moved much slower and likely not faced the same level of adversity. Furthermore, this study takes a much closer look at the role of misunderstanding the environment in driving ranching adaptation within the Alberta/Montana borderlands. *So Far and Yet So Close* makes a similar historiographical contribution as this study. However, the different geographic scope, focus on misinformation and borderlands economic region are what make this study unique to northern Great Plains ranching historiography.

The final contribution by professor Elofson, and one that this study engages with closely, is *Cowboys, Gentlemen and Cattle Thieves: Ranching on the Western Frontier*, published in 2000.¹⁰³ An important aspect of Elofson's thesis notes of open range ranching, "In retrospect it seems amazing that the big ranchers should have thought it appropriate to operate in this way," a few paragraphs later he states that Senator Matthew Cochrane, founder of the Cochrane Ranche, "seems to have been subject to the same sort of frontier virus."¹⁰⁴ The idea that the frontier in and of itself was an ailment causing foolish optimism was also used by Breen who wrote, "Ranching fever developed simultaneously in Canada as Canadian capitalists, particularly those already involved in the new eastern-based cattle export trade, discovered that a comparable

¹⁰³ Warren Elofson, *Cowboys, Gentlemen and Cattle Thieves: Ranching on the Western Frontier* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2000)

¹⁰⁴ Elofson, *Cowboys, Gentlemen and Cattle Thieves*, 6-9.

grazing area, already proven by small stockmen, existed in their own west.”¹⁰⁵ This dissertation both adds to, and challenges Elofson’s premise. First, by arguing for the ubiquity of booster literature this study identifies the mysterious frontier virus as one of optimistic misinformation. The notion that cattle ranching was a very profitable business was common by the early 1880s and prospective ranchers were well aware due to booster information. Furthermore, booster literature did not work with subtleties, everywhere boosters said cattle ranching was possible, the climate, grasses, and water were also ideal. As a result, with respect to Elofson’s assertion that ranchers should have known better than to try free range ranching, an important aspect of this study is to argue that they should not, and could not, have known better because of a lack of usable information. While Elofson put the onus on ranchers to, somehow, understand their environment with no information or experience, this study argues that ranchers were ignorant of their region and simply operated based on the information available. For both Montana and Alberta that involved importing the Texas system, as that was what the available information suggested.

An additional aspect of this study neglected in *Cowboys, Gentlemen and Cattle Thieves: Ranching on the Western Frontier* is the importance of the cross border regional economy between Montana and Alberta. Most of the large ranches in Alberta purchased entire herds of cattle, often several thousand animals, from Montana and trailed them north. These cattle purchases were considered important enough to the Alberta industry that duty on cattle was suspended for Alberta lease holders in 1882.¹⁰⁶ While rapidly stocking a range seemed like a simple way of jump-starting their industry it also came with numerous environmental and

¹⁰⁵ Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West*, 25.

¹⁰⁶ Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West*, 18.

logistical problems, all of which Alberta ranchers were unaware due to misleading booster information. Elofson's argument that ranchers were capitalists with no respect for their environment falls short. They were capitalists, but rapidly overstocking was more related to environmental ignorance suggesting it was a good idea, made possible by the preexisting borderlands economic region. This study argues that because ranchers did not, and could not, have known better they operated within the confines of the information they had. The available information included the belief that free range ranching was suitable for Alberta, therefore, importing thousands of cattle at a time was wise.

The geographic scope of this study also helps to differentiate it from *Cowboys, Gentlemen and Cattle Thieves: Ranching on the Western Frontier*. Elofson's work is concentrated on Alberta and the experience ranchers had within those political borders. This study is a bioregional examination of ranching that includes Montana because the same environment straddled the border. It demonstrates that ranchers in Montana, just as in Alberta, were exposed to the same misleading information leading to the importation of the same inappropriate ranching methods. After a series of successes ranchers on the north-western plains faced the same environmental difficulties and were forced to adapt their ranching practices. While Elofson acknowledges the role of the environment in ranching, his discussion of how it shaped ranching methods lacks the context provided by the discussions of boosters, the cross border economic region, and bioregionalism provided by this study. To paraphrase Elofson from his discussion of L.G. Thomas and David Breen, my intention is not to cast doubt on the immense value of Warren Elofson's work. He has been a foundational scholar in ranching history and is someone I respect. The goal here is to add to the excellent body of existing

ranching historiography and challenge some old ideas to elucidate a small part of ranching and environmental history that has been neglected.

Ranching in Canada was not confined to Alberta; Saskatchewan also has a rich ranching history. In *Saskatchewan: A New History*, historian Bill Waiser dedicated a chapter to ranching history in that province. The discussion inserts Saskatchewan ranching into the broader context of western Canadian history by including whisky traders, the NWMP, and the railroad. Ranching in Saskatchewan has its own unique and important story. For example, in Saskatchewan there was very little British investment in large scale ranches, the exception being the 76 Ranch.¹⁰⁷ In Alberta many of the largest ranches, the Walrond for example, were established with British capital.¹⁰⁸ Waiser's discussion of the 1906 hard winter where thousands of cattle, upwards of sixty percent of stock, were killed in a series of snow storms is of particular historiographical interest for this study.¹⁰⁹ The 1906/1907 winter in Alberta was also harsh and, according to Warren Elofson, was the death knell of the industry.¹¹⁰ The reason that Alberta was so ill prepared in 1906 was due to the relatively small number of cattle grazing overall in 1886. Cattle numbers in Alberta were significantly lower than in Montana as the industry had only been expanding for a few years; as a consequence, the Alberta ranges were less crowded in 1886 than they were in 1906. Furthermore, some of the larger operations had a varied topography that allowed for natural shelter. What this meant was that the Alberta losses in the 1886/1887 hard winter were unevenly distributed, especially when in comparison with Montana, Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma and Colorado. For those ranches that suffered greatly, like the A7, Cochrane Ranche

¹⁰⁷ Bill Waiser, *Saskatchewan: A New History* (Calgary: Fifth House, 2005), 51.

¹⁰⁸ Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money*, 22.

¹⁰⁹ Waiser, *Saskatchewan*, 56-57.

¹¹⁰ Elofson, *Frontier Cattle Ranching*, 141.

and Walrond, adaptations were undertaken. Those that suffered less so, not at all, or started up after 1887 continued to believe booster literature until the next drought, prairie fire or snow storm indicated otherwise.

An additional Saskatchewan ranching study conducted by Don C. McGowan looks at the Swift Current region during the 1870s-1900s. McGowan makes compelling arguments for water access and shipping routes being an early advantage for cattle ranchers over farmers. With respect to the climate, he categorizes it as semi-arid. Like other historians McGowan credits the C.P.R. with the existence of Swift Current generally; however, he also argues that the region was too dry for agriculture prior to the advent of dry land farming methods. As a consequence, he notes that "...the railway, therefore, created and justified the district, many years were to pass before the district was to justify a railway."¹¹¹ McGowan's work is an excellent local history from which broader trends can be extrapolated. His short discussion of short term weather trends masking climate was of particular interest to this study.¹¹² Considering the focus of McGowan's work this study and *Grassland Settlers* occupy a similar historiographical space as contributions to ranching and environmental history.

Alberta ranching historiography has predominantly focused on economics or culture, employed a decline narrative when discussing the environment, and been relatively unsympathetic to ranchers generally. It has neglected considering booster misrepresentations of the environment and the environment itself as essential context. Furthermore, most ranching histories tend to discuss the ranching industry as a whole and not focus on specific case studies. This study fills a historiographical gap by arguing that booster material oversold the northern

¹¹¹ Don C. McGowan, *Grassland Settlers: The Swift Current Region During the Era of the Ranching Frontier* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 1975). 11.

¹¹² McGowan, *Grassland Settlers*, 57.

Great Plains environment resulting in a fundamental misunderstood environment. It will use three Alberta ranches as specific case studies to get a unique perspective on how these ranchers gained a nuanced perspective of the environment through a series of disasters. When Matthew Cochrane, Duncan McEachran and Alfred Cross came west they had a flawed perception of the environment. As a result, they imported thousands of cattle and used the Texas system to manage them. The resulting disaster in 1886/1887 was therefore environmentally driven, made possible by ignorance of the environment. In the wake of this disaster all three of these ranches attempted to adapt. Some were successful and others much less so. However, based on the primary evidence, ranchers in this study recognized that they did not understand their environment and made some strides to operate within its limits.

While American ranching historiography is richer than its Canadian counterpart it also has significant gaps. Furthermore, even more so than in Canadian ranching history, American studies are hostile toward ranchers. The argument is, more often than not, ranchers responded to a booming market by overstocking their pastures due to greed and suffered for their environmental mismanagement. The free range period was then brought to a close with the onset of farmers and small scale ranching operations. The belief that ranchers had overstocked in Montana, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Wyoming appeared within months of the winter die-off in 1887. For example, that spring several newspapers, and even Granville Stuart of the DHS ranch in Montana, blamed ranchers for the disaster. However, this analysis, like Canadian ranching historiography, fails to account for an explanation other than greed.

In *The Day of the Cattleman* Ernest Staples Osgood described the cattle ranges in Montana, Wyoming and Oklahoma, “Herd was crowded in on herd till every square mile of

pasturage was utilized.”¹¹³ By the summer of 1886 the ranges of Montana had been depleted because ranchers who wanted to maximize profits had overstocked and a disaster was imminent. Osgood’s work is one of the first comprehensive academic histories of ranching on the Great Plains and, despite his economically focused analysis, remains one of the best. Osgood argues that the origin of the great cattle herds were draft oxen abandoned during the 1840s. From there he traces the rise and fall of the industry until the end of the free range period in 1900.¹¹⁴ The industry grew when herds were expanded by cattlemen trailing cattle north from Texas immediately following the end of the American Civil War. As the industry expanded throughout the 1880s the grasslands in Montana would become home to large herds of free roaming cattle. The story extends to where, due to large losses from overstocking, drought and winter kill, the industry ended as both cattlemen and investors lost faith. The vacated ranges were repopulated by farmers and small scale ranchers ending the open range. Osgood gleaned extensive primary material from the Wyoming Stock Growers Association and newspapers from the period. *The Day of the Cattleman*, however, is rooted in early 20th century historiography. As such, it, like Elofson in *Somebody Else’s Money*, relies on economic motivations as opposed to environmental conditions. Furthermore, Osgood plays down the significant misinformation from boosters in favor of blaming rancher’s greed for overstocking their ranges. *The Day of the Cattleman* remains one of the most important studies of the range cattle industry; however, it has left room for an environmental interpretation of events.

In 1931 Walter Prescott Webb wrote a canonical history of the west called *The Great Plains*. The bulk of this study deals with the changes associated with westward progress

¹¹³ Osgood, *The Day of the Cattleman*, 215.

¹¹⁴ Osgood, *The Day of the Cattleman*.

generally as American's pushed out of the adequately watered east into the semi-arid west. Where Webb, along with Donahue, Cunfer and Sherow, were valuable for this study is how settlers reacted to a new and unfamiliar environment. Imported agrarian techniques required almost constant adjustment in order to reach a temporary equilibrium.¹¹⁵ In a similar vein, cattle ranchers in the north-western plains imported the Texas system because booster literature had described an environment where that system could work. However, this ranching method was completely inadequate for both Alberta and Montana. Much like eastern farmers, in Webb cattle ranchers were forced to face the reality that the Texas system was not suitable and tried to adjust. A historiographical contribution of this study is to apply a well know methodological approach that has been used for farming to ranching. The historiography of farmers trying to operate within their bioregion is quite venerated while the same argument for cattle ranchers remains underdeveloped.

Webb's discussion of fences, additionally, was valuable. The move away from the Texas system for ranchers in Montana and Alberta required infrastructure like fences and corrals. While this topic is not the most exciting, fencing the western grasslands was an important innovation that demonstrates ranchers had learned about their environment. Webb's discussion of cattle ranching is historiographically similar to Osgood and most subsequent historians. For example, he wrote: "But by 1885 the time of reckoning had come. Overstocking had so reduced the grass that either drought or hard winter would bring disaster."¹¹⁶ Here, it is evident that he is following the narrative of Osgoode. While other parts of his argument are excellent, with respect to cattle

¹¹⁵ Cunfer, *On The Great Plains*.

¹¹⁶ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1931), 215.

ranching he was content to blame ranchers without digging deeper into the question of misperception.

From Free Grass to Fences published in 1961 by Robert Fletcher, who also wrote the song *Don't Fence Me In*, is a study of the history of Montana until the 1960s. However, as the title suggests, this history is viewed through the lens of the livestock industry. The overarching argument put forward by Fletcher considered the role played by Montana stock growers in protecting public land.¹¹⁷ The Montana cattleman as a rugged individualist is an important theme to Fletcher's work. He details the fight of the ranchman against government that sought to control Montana through regulation. Fletcher's research was extensive as he, like this study, made good use of the Montana Stock Growers Association files along with the resources of the Montana Historical Society. Fletcher's study was informative for how Montana ranchers viewed and used public land. In particular, Conrad Kohrs relied on public lands for grazing his stock. Fletcher's argument that cattlemen were not exploiters of the land but actively worked to protect it is one of the earliest attempts to complicate the decline narrative made popular by Osgood and Webb. This study will add greatly Montana ranching historiography by demonstrating that ranchers were more than happy to apply local regulations that helped protect their grazing land. What this suggests is an evolving perception of their environment and its limitations.

Within American ranching historiography this study engages closely with cultural geographer Terry Jordan. Jordan's *North American Cattle Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion and Differentiation*¹¹⁸ plays down the role of the Texas system in the Midwest and Canada. Jordan argues that it was the ranching techniques perfected in Iowa and Missouri that

¹¹⁷ Robert Fletcher, *From Free Grass to Fences* (New York: University Publishers, 1961).

¹¹⁸ Jordan, *North American Cattle Ranching Frontiers*.

were imported into the northwest. This study emphasizes that the Texas system was imported into Montana and Alberta and honed, although not perfected, through trial and error. The introduction of the Texas system resulted from an overarching misperception of the north-western plains based in booster representations of the environment and prevailing economic possibilities for ranching. This study will provided a valuable historiographical challenge to Jordan's by using a regional, case-study based argument.

The story of overstocking is common in western American historiography. Studies such as *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* by Richard White, *The American West A New Interpretive History* by Robert Hine and John Mack Faragher all make the same argument as Osgood and Webb. The fact that the narrative academically originating with Osgood was furthered in general history texts speaks to the contemporary power of the decline narrative and the unsympathetic view of ranching. A broad goal of this study is to challenge the decline framework and add nuance to a historically maligned industry.

The historiography of cattle ranching in the Great Plains generally and the north-western plains specifically all follow a similar declensionist narrative structure. The grasslands of northern Texas, Oklahoma, Colorado, Kansas, Wyoming, the Dakotas, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Montana were ideal for ranching. Ranchers came west with dollar signs in their eyes and, as a consequence, overstocked their ranges. The height of overstocking came in 1886 and coincided with both a drought and severe winter resulting in a massive loss of stock and capital. Ranchers and investors then abandoned their enterprises; small farmers and small stock raisers took over, ending one of the most romantic periods in western history. On the surface this story and framework are logical. Ranchers did come to make money and the ranges were overstocked. However, this is a very simple explanation for events that, when booster literature and primary

sources are consulted, are far more complicated. It is not my intention to criticize these authors. On the surface this disaster appeared to be economically driven, even to newspapers of the time. For example, in 1887 the *Rocky Mountain Husbandman* wrote, “Range husbandry is over, is ruined, destroyed, and it may have been from the insatiable greed of its followers.”¹¹⁹ Considering the focus of previous scholarship there is a large gap in the existing historiography for this study to fill.

Primary Sources

Between the 1790s and 1880s bison were hunted to near extinction from the Great Plains¹²⁰ and it was these “vacated” grasslands that were inherited by Alberta and Montana ranchers. The number of ranches capitalized during this period presents a logistical difficulty for doing significant analysis. In order to mitigate that problem five ranches were selected as case studies for how the environment was misunderstood and how ranching methods were adapted. The Alberta case studies are the A7 Ranche started by Alfred Ernest Cross, the Walrond Ranch started by Sir John Walrond and the Cochrane Ranche started by Mathew Cochrane. The Montana operations of Conrad Kohrs and Granville Stuart served as case studies for ranching south of the forty-ninth parallel. The size and, in some cases longevity, of these operations allowed for a wealth of documentary evidence to be preserved in several archives in both Alberta and Montana. It is these primary sources that form the backbone of the dissertation.

¹¹⁹ Osgood, *The Day of the Cattlemen*, 222.

¹²⁰ Andrew Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison*; Dobak, “Killing the Canadian Buffalo,” 33-52.

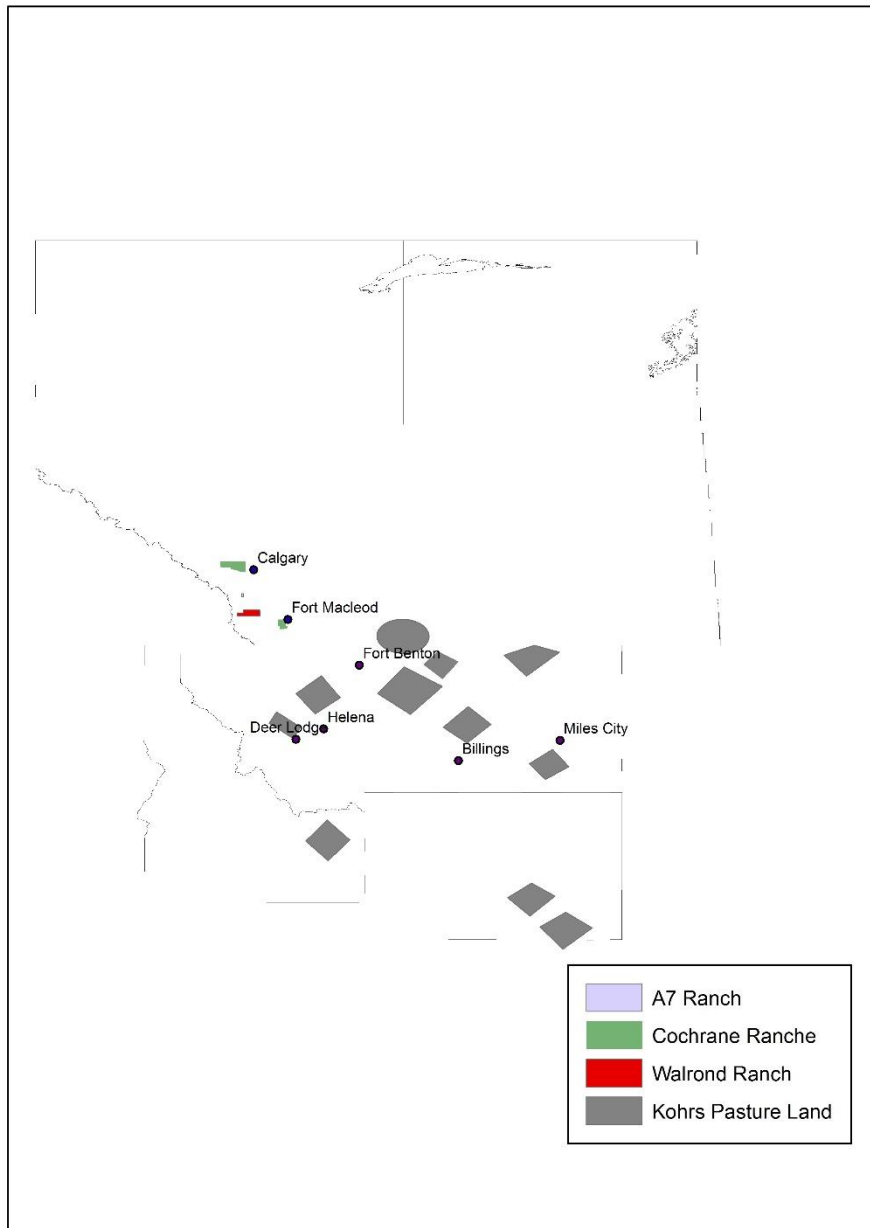


Figure 2: This map shows relative size and location of all the ranches in this study including all of the public land on which Conrad Kohrs relied. Ranchers in Canada leased their land which is why they have a well-defined cattle region. It also shows the location of Fort Benton, the economic hub of the Montana/Alberta borderlands economic region.

The primary documents for the A7, Walrond, and Cochrane ranches were obtained from the comprehensive (and friendly) collections at the Glenbow Museum and Archive. The bulk of the references come from letters and financial documents that were created as ranchers struggled with a series of environmental and economic disasters. Furthermore, the documents also express an exasperation at the vagaries of the climate generally, especially the winter, indicating that the reality of the climate was not what was expected. A very interesting single source for Alfred Ernest Cross was an examination he wrote as a student in Montreal. The exam tasked him with laying out how he would establish a ranching operation in the west. From this document it was possible to see the influence of boosters, as his discussion of potential environment problems is almost non-existent.

The discussion of Conrad Kohrs' massive operation and Granville Stuart's DHS Ranch relied on the materials that they created over a lifetime spent in Montana. Granville Stuart published his journal titled *Forty Years on the Frontier* where he outlined his entire life, including his time spent involved in the cattle industry.¹²¹ Conrad Kohrs, who led a long and successful life, dictated his autobiography. This source was relied upon heavily for understanding both the man and his business.¹²² However, as it was an *Autobiography* his motives, in particular as they related to public land, were scrutinized. As both of these men were important to early Montana history (Granville Stuart was often referred to as Mr. Montana and Kohrs was "the Cattle King of Montana") they are often referenced in local newspapers. For example, *The River Press* and the *Helena Weekly Herald* often reported on the cattle industry

¹²¹ Granville Stuart, *Fort Years on the Frontier as Seen in the Journals and Reminiscences of Granville Stuart, Gold-Miner, Trader, Merchant, Rancher, and Politician* (Cleveland: Arthur Clark, 1925).

¹²² Conrad Kohrs, *Conrad Kohrs: Autobiography of a Pioneer Cattleman* (held at the Montana Historical Society, Helena, 1998).

which included both Stuart and Kohrs. Through these primary documents it was possible to understand how these ranches were founded, how they understood their environment prior to 1886/1887, and how they adapted in the wake of such a massive loss of stock.

How ranchers perceived their environment has been neglected in ranching and environmental historiography. As a consequence, this is both a ranching history and an environmental/borderlands history that uses cattle ranching methods and a significant disaster to better understand how environments were understood and misunderstood. By focusing attention on the misinformation provided by boosters, it is possible to extrapolate William Cronon's favorite use for environmental history, the parable.¹²³ The intention of boosters was never to cause the near collapse of the cattle ranching industry. Similarly, ranchers themselves did not intend to overstock their herds and not plan for the possibility of a hard winter. Yet, when it did happen, many Alberta and Montana ranchers learned how to better adapt to their environment. With respect to current environmental anxieties around climate change, looking at the past for evidence not just of failure, but success after failure, make this study significant to challenging the overwhelmingly popular declensionist historiography.

Chapter Outline

This study examines early cattle ranching on the Montana/Alberta borderlands from its humble beginnings in the 1860s to the early twentieth century. Throughout these roughly fifty years ranchers responded to various environmental and economic challenges that forced them to adapt the Texas system to cool and dry climate. The chronological framework allows for a full examination of the founding of five ranches, the effect of booster literature on rancher's

¹²³ William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 7-28.

perception of their environment, responses to environmental adversity, and whether or not they were successful. The decline narrative common to environmental history often employs a narrow chronological framework, allowing the study to conclude on an environmental low point. The purpose of extending the scope in this study is to demonstrate that recovery after an environmental low point is an important aspect of human interaction with the natural world.

Chapter Two: Precursor to Northwestern Plains Ranching: Creation of a Borderlands Economy, examines the borderlands economic and environmental context into which the Montana and Alberta cattle industries emerged in the 1870s and 1880s. The core of the borderlands argument focuses on the T.C. Power and I.G. Baker firm's contributions to engendering a cross-border regional economy. The Baker and Power firms benefitted immensely from markets on both sides of the 49th parallel. One of the most important contributions of Power and Baker was their promotion of regional stability being vital to economic success. The borderlands economy was important to Alberta ranchers like Matthew Cochrane and Duncan McEachran who would buy entire herds of Montana cattle. Coinciding with the regional economy was an explosion of booster representations of the Montana and Alberta grasslands and a further development of markets at home and abroad. By the 1870s the representations of the Montana and Alberta borderlands economy was overwhelmingly positive, something that would then be generally extended to the environment. During the 1870s through the 1880s both American and Canadian governments would endorse the positive environmental representation by encouraging ranching in both Alberta and Montana. This period was a golden age for boosterism. Newspapers printed, almost exclusively, material intended to challenge any negative representations of the environment, especially locally. Their authors emphasized the economic opportunity for cattle ranching due to abundant grasses, water, and an amiable climate. For

ranchers the return on an investment in cattle seemed a sure thing and the result was an unprecedented level of investment into the west generally. This period was a “Beef Bonanza,” a term inspired by James Brisbin’s *The Beef Bonanza; or, How to Get Rich on the Plains* an immensely popular booster book written in 1881.¹²⁴ In a realistic sense the “Beef Bonanza” period saw hundreds of cattle operations running millions of cattle all over the Great Plains, from Texas to Alberta. It is important to note that neither the positive nor negative perception of the environment was accurate. Cattle ranchers, who were among the first Whites to settle the plains, bought into the booster ideal that presented a unique set of challenges requiring a varying set of responses.

The third and fourth chapters examine the early methods of the case study ranches leading up to the losses experienced during the 1886/1887 winter. For all five ranches the idea of a massive loss of stock over the general Great Plains was thought to be impossible. As a consequence, these cattle operations focused on increasing herd size over winter feed and shelter. The prevailing argument that ranchers overstocked due to greed is challenged here. What these chapters argue is a more nuanced interpretation stressing both misinformation and general ignorance of the environment as drivers of the 1886/1887 cattle disaster. The major points of investigation are the varied responses to predation, droughts, declining grasslands and severe winters. All four are environmental phenomenon absent from booster literature and were particularly costly to ranchers. Central to the argument in these chapters is how and why ranchers responded the way that they did.

¹²⁴ Brisbin, *Beef Bonanza*.

The fourth and fifth chapters examine the reaction of all four ranches to the winter 1886/1887. Before this point the idea that weather might kill up to 85% of stock was thought to be impossible, so planning for it was unnecessary.¹²⁵ However, after the massive loss of stock ranchers started to adjust their ranching methods accordingly. The steps taken to adapt form the core of this chapter. The significance of this event therefore was not the disaster itself but in how ranchers responded to it. Based on the Kohrs, DHS, Cochrane, Walrond and Cross ranches there was not one, right way to adapt to the plains; however, there were a myriad of ways to do it wrong. As a consequence, what was important was that ranchers recognized that booster representations were misleading and took steps to alter their ranching practices. The argument is not that ranchers were successful in adapting to their environment. Arguably, this not true of contemporary ranchers. What is important is to challenge the overwhelmingly declensionist argument that cattle ranchers were rapacious.

The history of cattle ranching in Alberta and Montana is a cautionary one, but not one that is necessarily declensionist in nature. The final chapters look at changes made by ranchers, although slow and often not enough, in order to better operate within the confines of their environment. Ranching historiography, despite having a lengthy pedigree, has not always been kind to ranching and ranchers on either side of the border. Like all other settlers in the west they were trying to do the best they could. However, ranchers had the added burden of over a decade of fundamentally misleading information to put behind them before they could begin to understand the limits of their environment. As a consequence, inappropriate ranching methods were adopted and during one particularly bad winter thousands of cattle died. Ranching took a

¹²⁵ Osgood, *The Day of the Cattlemen*, 212.

serious blow from that winter but it did not end. It is the adaptation after a disaster that differentiates this history from others.

Chapter Two: Precursor to Northwestern Plains Ranching: Creation of a Borderlands

Economy

Traditional borderlands historiographies follow one of two frameworks. Early borderlands historiography focused on the borders created by the Spanish Empire and so emphasized cultural and economic differences. In addition, borderlands historiography focused on American expansion. With respect to the Canada/U.S. borderlands the idea that the Canadian frontier was subject to American expansionist tendencies has been tied to frontier economies. Paul Sharp argues that merchants in Fort Benton, Montana controlled the extensive and profitable commerce of the Montana/Alberta borderlands.¹ Modern borderlands studies have deviated from that argument by making the case that culture can transcend national boundaries creating regional cultures and economies. It is in the more modern framework that borderlands regionalism has taken on an environmental component. Historian Theodore Binnema discussed the importance of considering a similar bioregion when examining both culture and economics for Montana and Alberta.² This chapter uses T.C. Power and I.G. Baker to demonstrate that, when large scale cattle ranching emerged onto the Montana/Alberta borderlands, a preexisting regional economy was already in place.³ The actions of both firms, in particular ending the whisky trade, filling government contracts and participating in the cattle industry, contributed to the economic context of booster representations of the Montana/Alberta borderlands. Last, the

¹ Sharp, *Whoop-Up Country*, 212-213.

² Evans, *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests*, 17-45.

³ James M. Francis, "Montana Business and Canadian Regionalism in 1870s and 1880s," *Western Historical Quarterly* 12 no. 3 (July): 291-304.

region, despite the border, was subject to the same type of booster representations. As a result, the same flawed ranching methods were imported to Montana and Alberta.

The 19th century was the apex of boosterism for the west. In *Nature's Metropolis* William Cronon noted that booster information contained numerous elements; a natural advantage such as grasslands, amiable climate, or transportation routes and the significant potential for large financial returns.⁴ T.C. Power and Brother and I.G. Baker and Co. fit within these elements. Booster information, in whatever form, was adopted almost immediately by newspaper editors, pamphleteers, and merchants who went on to give the information a life of its own. This study will add a third component of booster literature forwarded by the Power and Baker firms: stability. For the Power and Baker firms stability was the presence of government institutions, like the North West Mounted Police, railroads and other markets. What they did not want was an unsettled Indigenous population, unscrupulous whisky traders, and the resulting chaos from that sad industry.

During the 1870s and 1880s both Power and Baker were actively involved in the economic development of the Montana and Alberta borderland cattle industry. As their primary role was economic and not political they endorsed the assertion of Canadian authority north of the 49th parallel. Being some of the only merchants in the area, the presence of the North West Mounted Police (NWMP), an Indigenous population confined to reserves, cattle ranchers and, later, railway crews provided markets for their products. In short, Power and Baker companies were interested in selling products, which required stability. This was a drastic departure from

⁴ Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 35.

other borderlands along the 49th parallel, Minnesota in particular, where land ownership was paramount.⁵

The Early Years

The rapid growth and slow decline of the T.C. Power and I.G. Baker firms during the 1860s-1890s was, in many ways, similar to the rise and fall of the open range cattle industry during the same period. Both these firms and ranchers came to Montana and Alberta during a period of unbridled optimism and initially a great deal of money was earned. However, the optimism was based on boosterism and was, therefore, unreliable. For both Montana and Alberta, booster information carried additional weight because the glowing representations of healthy grasslands, transportation routes, and available markets were reinforced by the success of Power and Baker. The markets included miners who had moved west in order to strike it rich in the Montana gold fields and whose wealth had captured popular imagination, Indigenous populations who were being forced onto reservations, railway work gangs and cattle ranchers. The Fort Benton embarkation point on the Missouri River pre-dated both miners and merchants and satisfied the need for reliable transportation of goods. The booster context for Alberta and Montana was, in short, believable. Much like ranchers in the following decade, T.C. Power and I.G. Baker bought into a region that was promising.

I.G. Baker came to Montana in 1865 as a fur trader but within a year had moved into the whisky trade. He then changed into a mercantile trader in the 1870s to supply miners with goods that were not readily made on the Montana frontier. In 1873 Baker sold his interests in his Montana operation to the Conrad brothers, William, Charles, and John, and then moved his

⁵ Alvin Gluek, *Minnesota and the Manifest Destiny of the Canadian Northwest* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965).

office to St. Louis.⁶ The move to St. Louis made the I.G. Baker company a powerhouse on the Montana frontier. From that city Baker was able to organize the shipment of goods along the Missouri River to Fort Benton where they were sold to local markets. While it is common to think of eastern operations, such as Standard Oil, as the largest business empires during the 19th century I.G. Baker was no slouch as they moved 2.5 million dollars of merchandise through Fort Benton.⁷ The success of the Baker firm was not overnight; understanding how and why they went from whisky traders to mercantilist businessmen is important to understanding the role of booster literature and the drive for a stable business environment in the Montana/Alberta borderlands in the years leading up to the cattle boom.

T.C. Power and his brother John arrived in Fort Benton during the 1860s at the height of the Montana Gold Rush. The *Cleveland Morning Leader* wrote “It is predicted that when developed the country will prove one of the wealthiest and most productive of districts. From all accounts it really appears as if the dream of De Soto is at last to be realized in the gold fields of the far West, and the *Missouri Democrat* thus revels in the anticipated riches.”⁸ It is not surprising that the Power brothers came to sell goods to the miners, Indigenous population, and military garrisons extending American authority into the region. The Power brothers initially sold whisky and other goods to traders and the Indigenous population.⁹ However, by the 1870s they had altered their business into a wholesale mercantile operation with the establishment of a steamboat shipping line on the Missouri River, connecting them to manufacturing hubs in the eastern United States. By 1881, when ranchers were starting to arrive in Alberta, the Power

⁶ Sharp, *Whoop-Up Country*, 213-214.

⁷ Sharp, *Whoop-Up Country*, 213-214.

⁸ *Cleveland Morning Leader*, December 3 1858. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>.

⁹ Sharp, *Whoop-Up Country*, 214.

brothers had become the largest company in Montana. Their financial records for that year show a profit of over \$400,000.¹⁰ Within the context of boosterism the success of Power and Baker were important because it reinforced the fantastic representations of newspapers. Furthermore, during the 1880s T.C. Power operated a successful cattle ranch. It is likely that the Power firm's success, which reinforced booster information, played a role in making representations, both economic and environmental, more plausible.

For boosters, Fort Benton was a quintessential boomtown. By the late 1860s the small city on the Missouri River had all of the booster qualities described by William Cronon in *Nature's Metropolis*.¹¹ However, a Canadian city, Winnipeg, was also advantageously placed on the edge of the northwestern frontier. Between the two settlements there were differences that made Fort Benton a more attractive choice for both merchants and markets. The most important difference was the transportation route that had brought Lewis and Clark to Montana, the Missouri River. The principal trade during the 1860s was bison robes, a product that had its shipping cost determined by weight. For the traders looking to make the largest returns possible, Fort Benton and Missouri River was the obvious choice because freight could be moved easily and often.¹² However, the lack of government authority and the prevalence of the whisky trade meant one important quality was absent, stability. The lack of stability and its causes was confronted by the T.C. Power and I.G. Baker firms.

The territorial politics of the time reflected the importance of the Missouri River as a valuable transportation route. In 1867 thirteen steamers travelling toward Fort Benton were stopped because of low water resulting in a \$500,000 request to Congress as a means to clear the

¹⁰ Paul Sharp, "Merchant Princes of the Plains," *The Montana Magazine of History* 5, no. 3 (1955): 4.

¹¹ Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 33.

¹² Sharp, "Merchant Princes of the Plains," 4.

route. The request was not successful but was reiterated in 1873 at the behest of the Montana legislature. A sum of \$30,000 was allocated in 1878 to clear the Missouri River above Fort Union. The amount allocated was insufficient for the entire task, yet it was the start of a series of subsidies that would help build Forts, railroads and roads, all of which contributed to increasing the stability of Montana and grew its markets for goods. For suppliers like Power and Baker these markets were invaluable both as sources for their products and as institutions engendering market stability.¹³

The Whisky Trade

Prior to 1869 goods were brought up the Missouri River, unloaded at Fort Benton, and then hauled by wagon to various mining operations. The construction of the Union Pacific Railroad into Montana diverted much of this shipping south of Fort Benton. In 1873 the Diamond R Freighting Company and the Northern Pacific Railroad cooperated to establish an offloading point for goods below Fort Benton where they would then haul goods to Helena where Diamond R was located.¹⁴ The increase in rail traffic isolated Fort Benton and relegated the Power and Baker firms to operating within the whisky trade. Power and Baker's distaste for the whisky trade was both human and business related. In 1873 the Baker firm set up a post north of Fort Benton near the St. Mary's river, but the trading environment was so chaotic that they were forced to abandon it the following year. In a letter explaining the decision Baker wrote: "The whisky traders so annoyed them and demoralized the Indians that they were obliged to

¹³ Clark C. Spence, *Territorial Politics and Government in Montana 1864-1889* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1975). 277.

¹⁴ Lee Silliman, "The Carroll Trail: Utopian Enterprise," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, (April, 1974): 2-4.

remove in 1874.”¹⁵ With respect to the chaos of this sad trade, whisky drove the Indigenous population to steal horses and the traders to retaliate, often lethally.¹⁶ It is likely, especially considering the later business practices of both firms, that they saw a more secure future in dealing with ranchers, settlers, and government contracts than whisky traders. As a consequence, the desire for stability in the region turned I.G. Baker into a booster. In 1872 he sent a letter to the government of the Dominion of Canada where he noted that the region had both good grazing land and was promising for agriculture.¹⁷ As neither grazing nor farming could profitably occur in a location that lacked stability, regardless of its natural advantages, it is not surprising to find that both firms encouraged the establishment government institutions on both sides of the border.

One of the largest obstacles to tackling the whisky trade in the early 1870s was the ease with which American traders could cross the 49th parallel. Baker identified this issue to the Dominion government in a letter where he noted that “The U.S. Marshal has been active in trying to stop the whisky traffic; but is unable to suppress it above [north of the 49th parallel], owing to the [ease of the traders in] crossing the border.”¹⁸ What Baker and Power felt was an essential aspect of a successful business region was the presence of government institutions, especially in Canada. As a consequence, it is hardly surprising to find that both firms were supportive of the Canadian government sending the NWMP to Alberta. Furthermore, from a business perspective the availability of government contracts would have been far more

¹⁵ Letter, I.G. Baker and Co. Papers, M288, Frank M. Crosby Fonds 1863-1885, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

¹⁶ Waiser, *Saskatchewan: A New History*, 46.

¹⁷ Letter, I.G. Baker to the Dominion of Canada 1872, M288, Frank M. Crosby Fonds 1863-1885, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

¹⁸ Letter, I.G. Baker to the Dominion of Canada 1872, M288, Frank M. Crosby Fonds 1863-1885, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

attractive than trading whisky. From 1873 onward both of these firms distanced themselves from the unscrupulous whisky traders in northern Montana.

In 1874 the Dominion government received solid evidence that both firms were proponents of stability through order and were not involved in the whisky trade. Lieutenant Governor Alexander Morris, after an interview with an American in Winnipeg, reported that “Two American firms from Fort Benton who trade there do not use liquor in their dealings with the Indians...American traders would like to see Law and Order enforced.”¹⁹ It is more than likely that the American was talking about the Power and Baker firms because they were by far the largest in the area and Baker had already voiced his opposition to the whisky trade in an earlier letter to the Dominion Government. The disassociation from the whisky trade was important for Baker and Power because boosterism relied on promoting their region as a stable place that was good for ranching and agriculture. The inclusion of Canada indicated that they wanted to create a borderlands economy as opposed to a land grab that was common in other areas along the Canada/USA border.

During the 1870s tariffs imposed on non-Canadian goods were not a deterrent for either firm selling in Canada. In 1874 Power instructed his agents in southern Alberta to “show the police your invoices if necessary and tell them we stand ready to pay any duties the law demands.”²⁰ Power also experimented with purchasing buffalo robes and selling them in eastern Canada but this was a disaster. While Power did eventually sell some goods in eastern Canada, focusing on the regional borderlands economy became more important. In 1875 he used his

¹⁹ Lieutenant Governor Morris, April 20, 1874, M288, Frank M. Crosby Fonds 1863-1885, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

²⁰ Letter, T.C. Power to John Kerler, July 27, 1874, MC55 Box 179-1, T.C. Power Papers 1868-1950, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

prominent position and shipping line to sell goods made in eastern Canada in the west, thereby avoiding the tariff. In a letter to Martin McGinnis, Power asked him to "...accomplish the shipping in bond arrangement..."²¹ A bond allowed for Power to move large quantities of goods without fear of losing his entire business should a shipment be stolen or lost. The bond was accepted and from 1875 forward the Power and Baker firms' filled contracts for Canadian government workers and Indigenous people with Canadian made goods as often as possible. The fact that these steps were taken is a strong indicator that the border did indeed matter in an economic sense and it was not an impediment to a regional economy. Furthermore, any subsequent tariffs, on cattle for example, would fit within a preexisting borderlands economic framework and would not hamper cross-border economics.

At the same time as Power and Baker were moving Canadian goods west, agents of the American government were actively trying to end the whisky trade in Montana. In 1873 William Ensign, the Indian agent for northern Montana, noted that many Bloods, Peigan and Blackfoot had died from the health problems associated with alcohol. The Indian agent for Milk River, A.J. Simmons, noted that while action had been taken in Montana to stem the whisky traders including "...seizure and burning of trading houses, liquors, goods etc..." any success was undermined because "This traffic is still being extensively engaged in north of the line, in British Territory, by our own citizens and half-breeds from the Red River of the North."²² For the Power and Baker firms the order that they required to engage in a borderlands regional economy was being undermined by the 49th parallel.

²¹ Sharp, "Merchant Princes," 10-12.

²² A.J. Simmons, *Annual Report for 1872*. United States Department of the Interior, Montana State Historical Society and Archive, Helena. 661.

The American government put some pressure on John A. Macdonald's conservatives to extend Canadian authority in the west. But, the NWMP were supposed to be an aspect of settlement and settlement had not begun by the early 1870s. When this was combined with the Pacific Scandal and the Liberals being opposed to the idea of a national police force the whole scheme could have fallen apart and the Montana/Alberta borderlands would have remained chaotic. In a twist of fate for Power and Baker in 1873 American whisky traders massacred Assiniboine Indigenous people underlining the lack of stability in the region.²³ For Power and Baker, who had been agitating against the whisky trade, the event suited their goal of stability by encouraging government intervention north of the 49th parallel.

In the wake of the massacre Abel Farwell, the principal witness and employee of the Power firm, spoke to T.C. Power before the authorities. In *Whoop-Up Country* Paul Sharp reasoned that Power wanted the incident to look as bad as possible in order to put additional pressure on the Canadian government to send a police force west, which suited both Baker and Power's interests. Sharp suggests that Power influenced Farwell to characterize the incident as a massacre.²⁴ While it is impossible to know what, if any, words were exchanged between Farwell and Power, what is clear from Montana newspapers is that the pressure for Farwell to exonerate his fellow countrymen was immense, yet he did not. During the trial *The Benton Record* noted that Farwell had received a threatening letter and went on to state that violence against Farwell was not justified. The same article stated "...However indignant our people may feel towards Farwell they have no thought of treating him otherwise than with silent contempt."²⁵ Other publications, notably *The River Press*, wrote with disdain for Farwell who ultimately was forced to leave

²³ Waiser, *Saskatchewan: A New History*. 46.

²⁴ Sharp, *Whoop-Up Country*, 77.

²⁵ *The Benton Record*, August 7, 1875. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

Montana.²⁶ Whether the Power firm played a role in how the event was publicized is not clear; however, all aspects of the Cypress Hills Massacre, including how Farwell testified, were to Power and Baker's advantage.

The Cypress Hills Massacre was a turning point for the end of the whisky trade on both sides of the border. In order to further this goal the Territorial Delegate for Montana, Martin Maginnis, started voicing his concerns about whisky traders and their violent, deleterious industry in Washington. One of Maginnis' roles was to represent the interests of Montana business and for Baker and Power this meant creating a stable borderlands region. In this capacity Maginnis spoke out against the whisky trade, pushed for the apprehension of whisky traders, and advocated for funds from Washington for a prison and for creation of a garrison.²⁷ In essence, Maginnis was agitating for exactly the kind of institutional changes that would benefit Power and Baker by making Montana, in both reality and perception, more attractive to settlers and ranchers.²⁸

Power and Baker instructed their business representatives to treat the authorities, on both sides of the border, with respect. The Power and Baker firms, as a result, made a profitable business selling goods to them. On the northern side of the border the NWMP were dispatched in 1873 and present by 1874. Their presence, in combination with the efforts of authorities in Montana, led to the large scale collapse of the whisky trade.²⁹ In an 1874 letter T.C. Power showed his respect for the law when he instructed that his employees "...keep whisky away from

²⁶ *The River Press*, September 11, 1880. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

²⁷ *Helena Weekly Herald*, August 19, 1875; *The New Northwest*, April 2, 1875. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

²⁸ Clark C. Spence, *Territorial Politics and Government in Montana* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975). 116-150.

²⁹ For a far, far better analysis of the Whisky Trade see; Waiser, *Saskatchewan: A New History*.

their posts...”³⁰ I.G. Baker seems to have followed Power’s lead with respect to avoiding the whisky trade. The role played by Power and Baker in the end of the whisky trade was important for their economic vision for the Montana/Alberta borderlands. Both firms were boosterish in their endorsement of stability by stamping out the whisky trade and its inherent chaos. The end of the whisky trade was the beginning of a regional borderlands economy that was dominated by these two firms. For the ranchers who responded to booster representations of the Montana/Alberta grasslands, the presence of an established and cross-border economic network made the area even more attractive.

Government Contracts

The effort expended by both firms in ending the whisky trade, and more importantly distancing themselves from it, was a significant step in creating a borderlands economic region. The result was that both the Power and Baker firms were in an advantageous position to land lucrative government contracts, further entrenching themselves as representatives of a booming west and exploiters of it. The NWMP police and the merchants of Fort Benton entered into a symbiotic relationship after 1874 because the police provided both security and a ready market. Prior to the completion of a national railroad the Hudson’s Bay Company could not compete with the established shipping routes into Fort Benton. And, as noted, much of the goods being brought in by Power and Baker were Canadian. From a borderlands perspective the presence of both security for transactions and a ready market made booster representations, some of which were coming from Power and Baker themselves, of Montana and Alberta more plausible.

³⁰ Letter, T.C. Power to J. Kerler, July 27, 1874, MC50 Box 179-1, T.C. Power Papers 1868-1950, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

The actions of both firms were shrewd and rational. When the police or military set up a fort one of the firms would set up a shop next to them. For example, the I.G. Baker Company was contracted to build Fort Calgary and upon its completion they built a store to provide supplies. Power employee, D.W. Marsh, noted that “The Indian question is getting too mixed to risk goods where there are no police.”³¹ What this engendered was a positive borderlands relationship between Montana merchants and the Canadian police that lasted well into the 1880s. In fact, the presence of the Mounted Police and the increased importance of the border extended the economic influence of Fort Benton into Canada.

The police were not the only market existing on the northern Great Plains. Both the Baker and Power firms were successful in securing contracts to sell to Indigenous people on both sides of the border because of their access to preexisting shipping routes and therefore supplies. This was a privileged position and one they guarded vigorously. In an 1875 letter the Power and Baker firms discussed refusing to sell trading outfits to any, and all, competition who wanted to sell to Indigenous people.³² The work here paid off, in 1881 I.G. Baker was worth between \$175,000 and \$200,000, much of his wealth coming from contacts with the Canadian government.³³ While this may seem as though American firms were getting rich selling to Canadian Indigenous peoples, many of the goods were purchased in Canada and shipped west to avoid the import tariff.

The success of Baker and Power in Canada was noticed by Canadian firms who began to resent the number and value of contracts awarded to American businesses. In particular,

³¹ Letter, D.W. Marsh to T.C. Power, January 27, 1881, MC55 Box 106-8, T.C. Power Papers 1864-1950, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

³² Letter, T.C. Power to I.G. Baker, December 2, 1875, MC 55 Box 180-1, T.C. Power Papers 1864-1950, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

³³ Henry Klassen, “I.G. Baker and Co. in Calgary,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 35, no. 3 (1985): 46.

Canadian firms resented the manner in which these firms collaborated to, according to many, siphon off wealth. In 1882 Assistant Commissioner Irvine wrote that “a large amount of money has been expended, of which there is little or nothing to show, our money is merely aiding to build up the town of Benton, U.S.A.”³⁴ However, this suggests that the Baker and Power firms had become successful within their regional economy due to the presence of Canadian institutions indicating that the border did not hinder business. This free movement of goods and services would become increasingly important for the importation of livestock, cattle and sheep, during the 1880s cattle boom.

As a method to further position themselves in the borderlands economy and add to the booster message of available transportation and economic stability both Baker and Power set low rates for their steamships on the Missouri River. T.C. Power held the controlling interest in the Fort Benton Transportation Company. When he was dealing with the rates for Baker’s firm he wrote that “...no one is to have a less rate from our line than you and outside of ourselves..., no one else is to have as good a rate by ten per cent...”³⁵ The control over shipping routes was short lived, however. The railroad companies moving into Montana were able to break Power and Baker’s monopoly on shipping. The response of both firms was to work together to make sure that they were the most reliable choice for filling government contracts. The way this was done was to use their position as large firms to keep other bidders from fulfilling their contracts. Their 1881 agreement stated that, “neither party was in any way to assist in the freighting or helping

³⁴ Paul Sharp, “Merchant Princes”, 15.

³⁵ Fort Benton Transportation Company to Tom Todd of the I.G. Baker Co. March 3, 1883, MC55 Box 15-30, T.C. Power Papers, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

the outside party getting the contract to fill it in anyway whatever either directly or indirectly but to all they could to honorably defeat them.”³⁶

North of the 49th parallel Power and Baker were working to position themselves advantageously by eliminating competition to increase revenues, something that likely upset Canadian firms as well. To this end Power sold his Fort Macleod store, stock and all to Baker who, in turn, sold his Fort Walsh operation to Power.³⁷ The result of eliminating competition was an increase in prices. The people living near either location could not have been happy about his turn of events. In a letter to T.C. Power, Thomas Bogey wrote that “The people of the Macleod country got it bang in the nose on prices. They could not appreciate having two houses there... They probably understand matters a little better now.”³⁸ Considering the actions of both firms it is possible that an additional motive for eliminating the whisky trade was to eliminate competition. However, there is no documented evidence that indicates this directly. While this sounds like the worst form of unfettered capitalism, and in many ways it was, it is important to note that from a borderlands perspective what these firms had done was to create a regional economy. The Montana/Alberta borderlands regional economy spanned from Fort Benton to north of Calgary. It was characterized initially by Montana merchants selling goods to the Canadian market. However, when ranchers came to Alberta they would use the borderlands economy to rapidly stock their ranges through large scale cattle purchases.

Baker, Power and the start of the Range Cattle Industry

³⁶ Agreement between Baker and Co. and Power, 1881, MC55 Box 273-28, T.C. Power Papers 1868-1950, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

³⁷ Agreement between Baker and Co. and Power, 1881, MC55 Box 13a-9 T.C. Power Papers 1868-1950, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

³⁸ Thomas Bogey to T.C. Bower, 1883, MC55 Box 14-21, T.C. Power Papers 1868-1950, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

An additional market was added to the regional economy of the Montana and Alberta borderlands during the late 1870s and early 1880s. Cattle ranchers, much like miners, had been lured to the northwest with booster representations of free grass, abundant water, established lines of shipping and an amiable climate. What made the cattle industry particularly well suited to a borderlands economy was that a similar environment existed on both sides of the 49th parallel. For that reason Power and Baker, even more so than in previous years, were able to exploit a single industry. The Power and Baker firms were important to the development of the cattle industry on both sides of the border and would continue their importance in the regional economy that they, through their boosterism, opposition to the whisky trade and business acumen, had helped create.

During the early 1870s cattle ranchers pushed into the northern part of Montana where Power and Baker were most prominent. The Sun River valley was an important grassland for this transition. As early as 1869 Conrad Kohrs was grazing nearly 1,000 head here. By the early 1880s cattle ranching had expanded from the Sun River to Fort Benton, the Judith Basin, and the Musselshell regions. The grass in Montana was mostly on public land and ranchers grazed their cattle for free.³⁹ In Alberta there was a different approach. The Canadian government had devised a lease system whereby large tracts of land, up to 100,000 acres, were leased to individual ranchers.⁴⁰ This system engendered what historian David Breen characterized as a “British-Canadian West” that had a political orientation directed firmly toward Ottawa.⁴¹ While

³⁹ Michael P. Malone and Richard B. Roeder, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976), 145-172.

⁴⁰ Howard Palmer and Tamara Palmer, *Alberta: A New History* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1990), 53-54.

⁴¹ Breen, *Canadian Prairie West*, 23-70.

it is true that many ranchers in Alberta were well connected eastern transplants, they were a long way from home and therefore dependent on the regional borderlands economy.

Both the Power and Baker firms were heavily involved with the range cattle industry on both sides of the border. During the late 1870s T.C. Power established the Judith Cattle Company on recently opened lands in Montana.⁴² Due to the number of workers coming west with the railroad and both firms prominence within the region they looked to secure government contracts to feed workers. In 1882 Power landed a contract to supply beef to Canadian railway workers. A.P. Simmons suggested to Power that a beef contract would be lucrative and he should use his connections to arrange one.⁴³ The contract began in 1884, but it proved difficult to fill. Employees of the Power firm, especially D.W. Marsh, were worried about running cattle north, especially where the terrain was rugged, and wrote Power to express his unease.⁴⁴ This was a perfectly reasonable concern considering other disastrous cattle drives during the period.⁴⁵ The solution was a made-in-Canada one, as it required slaughtering the cattle in January and shipping the meat frozen.⁴⁶ In the end the contract lasted a year, was paid in full by the Canadian Pacific Railroad and the Power firm showed a profit of nearly \$33,000.⁴⁷ Considering that both firms had agitated for government stability roughly a decade prior to this in order to secure these types of contracts this profit must have felt like a vindication. Within a broader borderlands,

⁴² Malone, *Montana*, 113.

⁴³ A.P. Samples to T.C. Power, March 7, 1882, MC55 Box 162-8 T.C. Power Papers, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁴⁴ Marsh to T.C. Power, June 27, 1884, MC55 Box 16-30, T.C. Power Papers 1864-1950, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁴⁵ In particular a drive to the Cochrane Rancho in 1882 by I.G. Baker and Co. will be further expanded upon in a later chapter.

⁴⁶ Marsh to T.C. Power, January 2, 1884, MC55 Box 129-3, T.C. Power Papers 1864-1950, Montana Historical Society, Helena

⁴⁷ Letter to T.C. Power, September 6, 1886, MC55 Box 17-38, T.C. Power Papers 1868-1950, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

environmental and booster context this contract (and others) indicated the Montana/Alberta region was living up to its booster representations.

For T.C. Power and I.G. Baker the increase in ranching activity in Alberta during the 1880s was an opportunity to extend their reach into the economic region they had helped to create. In 1883 Power reached a deal with the Walrond Ranch for \$100,000 worth of cattle and a stake in the Walrond Ranch itself.⁴⁸ The sale to the Walrond Ranch was not a one-off event. As Alberta ranching became increasingly important firms like Baker and Power would be called upon to supply cattle and other ranching necessities. Reports filed by the Department of Agriculture show a continual increase of cattle shipments to Alberta coinciding with the establishment of numerous large ranching operations north of the border.⁴⁹

The sale of cattle was not only from the Power and Baker firms to Canadian ranchers, both firms were large purchasers of stock as well. The government contracts secured by I.G. Baker to supply beef to Indigenous people needed to be filled and Canadian ranchers sold to Baker to meet this end. On July 2, 1884 *The River Press* reported that Matthew Cochrane “effected a sale of 12,000 head of 3 year-old steers last week to I.G. Baker and Co., at \$65 a head. They are purchased by the firm to fill their Indian supply contract with the government. The sale is considered a very good one, and gives a good index of what the future of the trade is likely to become.”⁵⁰ The booster element here is unmistakable and fits in with the broader context that the success of Baker and Power helped justify the booster information regarding stock raising on the northern plains. The fact that it was a Canadian ranch selling to an American

⁴⁸ This was a complicated deal that will be more fully explored in a later chapter.

⁴⁹ Report for the Minister of Agriculture, 1885, Sessional Papers 7, no. 10, 176, Montana State Historical Society and Archive, Helena,

⁵⁰ *The River Press*, July 2, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

firm to fill a contract with the Canadian government reinforces the importance of the regional economy.

Cattle were not the only grazers on the northern plains during the 1880s. Sheep were introduced at the same time as cattle in order to exploit a burgeoning wool market. In much the same vein as the Judith Cattle operation T.C. Power opened a sheep ranch in 1883. *The Benton Weekly Record* reported in 1883 that “X. Beidler and Henry J. O’Hanlon, with T.C. Power and Bro. intend starting a sheep ranch at the Big Sag in a few days...”⁵¹ The viability of selling sheep to Alberta stock raisers resulted from the 1883 winter on the Cochrane Ranche and Matthew Cochrane deciding to graze sheep on his northern range. *The River Press* reported the purchase in September of 1884 stating “Mr. Kerfoot, superintendent of the Cochrane sheep ranch, is homeward bound from Montana with 8,000 sheep.”⁵² The same newspaper followed up on the increase in sheep being sold to Alberta raisers in 1885 noting “...our market for sheep for the next five years will be the Northwest”⁵³ and in a later edition *The River Press* described the economic scenario for wool as “Montana wool is in such high demand now that higher prices will be the rule this season, and the outlook for the sheep industry is more encouraging than ever before.”⁵⁴

I.G. Baker and T.C. Power, and other firms, played a valuable role in creating the economic context for the Montana/Alberta range cattle industry. The success of the two firms in securing and then filling government contracts, often for beef, made the economic and environmental potential for ranching fit within the booster representations. As a consequence,

⁵¹ *The Benton Weekly Record*, March 24, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁵² *The River Press*, September 10, 1884, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁵³ *The River Press*, March 11, 1885. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁵⁴ *The River Press*, June 10, 1885. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

cattle ranchers would enter into the Montana/Alberta borderlands region with a wholly unrealistic understanding of the environment, especially its limits. By 1886 when the ranges in Montana were, according to rancher Granville Stuart, overstocked it was due to a fundamental misunderstanding of the environment due to booster information made more plausible by the economic success of T.C. Power and I.G. Baker.

By the 1870s representations of the environment for the Canadian and American west(s) were almost entirely positive. These booster representations were promulgated by promoters of settlement, ranching, agriculture and business. During the 1870s governments, especially in Canada, would enter the discussion and fully endorse ranching in Alberta. South of the border representations of the environment had already trended positive, possibly because of expansionist governments starting the 1840s or perhaps because the climate actually was better. Nevertheless, it is important to reiterate that neither the positive nor the negative representations of the environment were accurate. Cattle ranchers, who were among the first Whites to settle the plains, bought into the booster ideal which presented a unique set of challenges requiring a varying set of responses.

During the American Civil War the vast cattle herds of Texas experienced an unprecedented period of natural increase. The Union army had created a blockade that prevented the shipping of cattle north and many of the men who would have been working on the range were off fighting. The result was the herds of cattle that once had their numbers controlled through slaughter and sale grew for five years. Ironically, due to their numbers, cattle had both decreased in value and were an environmental burden on the limited carrying capacity of the

Texas plains.⁵⁵ As a consequence, following the end of the Civil War in 1865, cattle ranchers and traders were on the search for both new markets and grasslands for their herds.

The solution was to move cattle north. The first move was into the Corn Belt to fatten the older animals prior to shipping, from most often Chicago.⁵⁶ Cattle were later driven further north into Montana and, eventually, Alberta. This move made sense for numerous reasons but most significant were the emerging markets of miners, Indigenous people, and frontier settlers coupled with the overwhelmingly positive environmental representations of the grasslands that had been promulgated from the 1840s through the 1860s. For example, in an 1865 edition of *The Montana Post* a miner named Delver wrote “There was grass in the valley for thousands of cattle and there has been little snow here all winter. Scattered timber is to be found in the valley, and four miles off any quantity of good pine is obtainable.”⁵⁷ Essentially, what Delver described was the perfect ranching territory adjacent to a market. These representations were then coupled with the success of the Power and Baker firms making them more enticing.

The Power and Baker firms were not the only wholesalers in northern Montana but they were among the largest and most important. The success of both firms demonstrated that a preexisting regional economy, complete with markets for beef, was in place at the onset of ranching. The actions of both firms, in particular agitating for stability, filling government contracts and selling beef, contributed to the economic context of the Montana/Alberta borderlands. The success of Power, Baker and other firms had a two pronged effect. First, because they were operating on both sides of the border their economic success fed into booster

⁵⁵ Joseph McCoy, *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest 1874*, (Reprint Washington, D.C.: Rare Book Shop, 1932); 55; Jordon, *Trails to Texas*, 55-58.

⁵⁶ McCoy, *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade*, 56.; Jordon, *Trails to Texas*. 55-58.

⁵⁷ *The Montana Post*, Virginia City, April 29, 1865. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

representations for fantastic returns on cattle ranching in Montana and Alberta. As noted by Cronon, guaranteed economic success was an important aspect to boosterism.⁵⁸ Second, the regional economy was essential to jump-starting the cattle business in Alberta. In the 1880s ranchers in Alberta, including Cochrane and McEachran, purchased entire herds of cattle and trailed them north to start their massive operations. In this way, the rapidity that Alberta was stocked owed a debt to the regional economy Power and Baker helped define.

⁵⁸ Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 35.

Chapter Three: Creation of a Ranching Industry on the Northern Plains

By the late 1870s the vanguard of Europeans bringing “civilization” was moving westward to inherit the open grasslands that had previously been home to the bison and Indigenous peoples.¹ The change in land-use from Indigenous people to North American ranchers engendered ecological and economic effects that would become increasingly pronounced as more and more cattle were brought onto the plains. Significant to this discussion were changes in the representations and proposed land use for this recently “vacated” space. Proposed western settlement, therefore, was not simply to fill a recently empty space with people but to provide agricultural products for European and local markets.

European markets were located primarily in Britain. Demand from Britain resulted from both an expanding population and an increase in the amount of meat consumed on a per capita basis.² The increasing demand, in and of itself, was not enough to spur the hundreds of thousands of cattle raised on the Great Plains of both the United States and Canada. As demand for beef increased and became an expected part of the British diet, the ability for Britain to produce beef locally was decimated by a series of infectious diseases transported from mainland Europe.

Historian Simon Evans noted:

Pleuropneumonia had been imported in England in 1842 and had remained endemic. In the period between 1869 and 1876 losses were estimated to have been in excess of 5.5 million head of cattle. In addition, foot-and-mouth disease was widespread, and was reported to have caused losses of more than \$67 million in 1872 alone. Thus Britain became increasingly dependent on imported supplies of meat. During the 1840s almost all of the meat consumed in Britain was domestically produced; by 1914 about half was imported.³

¹ William Dobek, “Killing the Canadian Buffalo,” 33-52.

² Evans, “Canadian Beef,” 748-762.

³ Evans, “Canadian Beef,” 749.

The increase in demand and decrease in supply created an economic impetus for cattle ranching in Canada. At the same time, the regional borderlands economy had created a situation where cattle ranges could be quickly populated with Montana stock. With the demand for cattle there was an opportunity for the other parts of Canada to secure and hold onto an important market if they could make it economically viable.

The first cattle shipped from Canada to Britain in 1872 came from the long-settled areas of Ontario and Quebec. These shipments started small but continued to grow through the following decade as transportation methods for live animals improved and financial returns on cattle steadily increased. The main advantage for shipping animals in Canada was that by starting their trans-Atlantic voyage on the St. Lawrence the animals were in calm waters and the temperature was cool during the crucial first few days of travel. Calm water and cool temperatures were important to prevent losses during the first few days at sea. The reason for the relatively good treatment of cattle occurred due to the effort of Dr. Duncan McEachran. McEachran became one of the most ardent boosters and believers in booster representations of the Alberta environment as a prominent rancher with the Cochrane Ranche and later the Walrond. Under his leadership as the chief inspector of quarantines, conditions at the points of departure were vastly improved. McEachran was the leading Canadian veterinary surgeon of his time and was the founder of the Montreal School of Comparative and Veterinary Medicine. Learning from a British disaster in 1842 McEachran was concerned with the importation of diseased animals which led to the establishment of quarantine stations at all major points of embarkation in 1876.⁴ The resulting regular inspection of both animals and holding pens

⁴ Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West*, 27.

resulted in fewer losses along the Allan and Dominion shipping lines.⁵ The comparably few losses also benefitted shippers with low insurance rates and therefore higher returns. Cattle were light, could be shipped in the open, and required little infrastructure that would take up valuable cargo space on the return voyage.

Shipping live cattle to Britain had proved to be economically viable based purely on logistics. However, was shipping cattle across the ocean hard on the animals, thereby resulting in an inferior product for British consumers? The answer, which succeeded in shoring up the image of the Canadian product and representations of the environment, came from an award-winning shipment of cattle sent by Matthew Cochrane of Quebec in 1877. Cochrane had experimental stock farms in Quebec and Ontario. According to the Department of Agriculture “Though the number of farmers who have ventured in the experiment of stock-breeding on a large scale is not great the test has been most thorough and complete in both Ontario and Quebec.”⁶ The overall quality of his animals, which included breeding bulls, suggested that shipping live cattle did not necessarily result in damaged or inferior animals.⁷ By the 1880s Cochrane was a leader in breed improvement in Alberta.

The success of this early trade, both financially and logistically, received another boost in 1879 when Britain required U.S. live cattle to be slaughtered within 10 days of their arrival to prevent the spread of pleurapneumonia and foot-and-mouth disease. Canada, however, had avoided this regulation by shutting down the St. Lawrence River to American cattle. What this regulation established for Canada was a privileged position within the Atlantic live cattle trade.

⁵ Evans, “Canadian Beef,” 751.

⁶ Government of Canada, *Dominion of Canada: A Handy Book for Emigrants* (Ottawa: Department of Agriculture, 1880), 18.

⁷ Evans, “Canadian Beef,” 752.

The advantage granted to Canadian cattle would remain until 1892. It is important that this regulation did not extend to cattle purchased in Montana and raised in Alberta.

All of these factors combined to grow the market for shipping live cattle at the very time booster literature was extolling the quality of the grasses and climate of the Canadian prairie, the logical new location for large cattle herds. For example, in an 1879 edition of the *Globe*:

The country lying between Winnipeg and Fort Macleod, known as the “Great Lone Land” is not a very inviting one, though according to Col. Macleod it has been needlessly disparaged. Almost every part of it supplies natural pasturage for cattle, so that the police or travelers require to carry for their horses nothing but oats, grass being always obtainable. The greatest drawback is the scarcity of water, a guide being always necessary to ensure the safety of a tourist unacquainted with the route... This line (the Great Fertile Belt) it will be seen... in the longitude of Fort Macleod, and, though near the Rocky Mountains, the soil and climate are both good.⁸

This endorsement is indicative of the booster representations for the environment generally and cattle ranching specifically. The numbers of cattle shipped annually had been increasing steadily since 1872 which created an economic impetus for increasing cattle numbers in western Canada to be shipped east or consumed locally. The years from 1879 to 1892 saw numerous policies passed that allowed for Alberta to enter the North American meat industry.⁹

Markets, a New Narrative and Encouraging Legislation

For the Canadian government there was no a better group of individuals to lease stock-land than those who had been intimately involved in the eastern cattle trade, and who already had valuable contacts in Britain. The Canadian government was also aware of the massive investments of British capital in the American cattle industry from the early 1870s forward, and they wanted to divert that capital north. The solution was to grant large leases of land to

⁸ *The Globe*, January 13, 1879. <http://search.proquest.com/hnpglobeandmail/advanced?accountid=14739>.

⁹ Evans, “Canadian Beef,” 752.

investors. In 1881 leases of up to 100,000 were granted for a period that could not go beyond 21 years.¹⁰ The connection between cattle ranchers and government ensured that the cattle industry would dominate in Alberta. For example, by the 1880s 4.4 million acres were under lease in the North-West Territories. Of those 4.4 million acres, sixteen individual leases were for one hundred thousand acres or more.¹¹

The valuable international markets for cattle were significant, however, they were not the only markets available. In 1874, two years after the first shipments of live cattle were sent to Britain, the first of four significant frontier markets, the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP), arrived in Southern Alberta. The second market was the Indigenous population who were being increasingly confined to reservations between 1871 and 1876. This created a local market for beef specifically due to the food provision written into Treaty 7 and the high cost of salt pork. The third market was coal mining communities in Southern Alberta. The final market was supplied by the Canada Pacific Railroad in the form of the massive work gangs required to build the expanding rail system. Furthermore, Canadian ranchers selling to American companies had access to American forts and railroads as well. These markets were influential in the creation of a western cattle industry and were addressed directly by Matthew Cochrane in an 1880 letter to John A. Macdonald. Cochrane wrote “Without a beef industry in the west to supply the NWMP and an Indigenous supply for the police-force and for the Indians from Montana Territory the amount paid to foreigners for food supplies has been considerable.”¹² Ironically, he is likely referring to the Power and Baker firms to whom he would sell his cattle in 1882 in order to fill

¹⁰ Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West*, 18.

¹¹ Max Foran, *Trials and Trails: Markets and Land Use in Alberta Beef Cattle Industry 1881-1948* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2003), 2.

¹² Matthew Cochrane to John A. Macdonald, December 1880, M234, Cochrane Ranch Company Ltd. Fonds 1881-1892, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

their government contract. Nevertheless, the benefit, even at a local level, was obvious. The federal government had control of these lands and a duty to the people on them. Therefore, the creation of an industry that would keep capital in the Dominion, encourage settlement, and allow the government to meet its obligations in a cost-effective manner was advantageous.

The existence of local and export markets were not enough to convince wealthy Canadians to invest millions into ranching. The Canadian government had been “selling” potential investors on the west since the 1850s but now it focused specifically on ranching.¹³ The means to do so were found in commercial reports that argued for the suitability of the northwest to cattle ranching. Both John Macoun and John Mercer Dawson noted that western Canada’s environment and grasslands were particularly amiable to cattle ranching in the mid-1870s. Dawson, in his 1873-74 report, referred to the Canadian plains as “...a great area well suited for pastoral occupation and stock-farming.”¹⁴ Two years later in 1876, Macoun informed the House of Commons Select Committee on Agriculture and Colonization that “the Canadian portion of the American desert had a better climate and was suited to stock raising.”¹⁵ With respect to repopulating the Canadian plains with cattle these positive assessments, accurate or not, are significant for two reasons. First, they shored up the idea that cattle ranching, among other uses, was possible. Second, that long term leases for cattle ranching, a land use system that was going to implemented 5 years later, was therefore logical.

An additional method used to further cement the positive environmental representations and convince investors to move west was public lectures. One such lecture entitled “Our Great

¹³ Doug Owsram, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

¹⁴ Foran, *Trials and Trails*, 2.

¹⁵ Foran, *Trials and Trails*, 2.

North-West As A Home For The Emigrant” was held on February 13, 1879 by Professor R. Bell, M.D., F.G.S., Senior Assistant Director of the Geological Survey of Canada. The *Globe* reported that the purpose of the lecture was to “...give them an account of the country from a personal acquaintance with it...”¹⁶ The content of the lecture was decidedly boosterish. For example, Bell noted that “Unlimited quantities of wild hay could be cut by mowing-machines, and thus the wintering of cattle was rendered easy, whilst horses found their living out doors.”¹⁷ Bell’s quotation reinforced the utility of the Texas system and the overall ease of ranching, neither of which were true for the Alberta or Montana grasslands.

By 1880 the Canadian government had begun to officially reinforce the suitability of the west both generally and for cattle ranching. In 1880 the department of Agriculture published *Reports of Tenant Farmers’ Delegates on the Dominion of Canada as a Field for Settlement*. Settlement and cattle ranching in the west were described as “the hay is better adapted for cattle than horses; so that a man going in to settle generally commences using cattle for ploughing and hauling.”¹⁸ In the same year, 1880, the Canadian Department of Agriculture published *Dominion of Canada: A Handy Book for Emigrants* where they state “It is a fact established beyond all doubt that the famous short horns of England not only do well in Canada, but that the character of the stock actually improves in the new country.”¹⁹

The privileged position Canada held in the Atlantic cattle trade helped not only to encourage expansion but also the creation of lease holdings on crown land in Alberta, which were made available specifically for ranchers. The original Dominion Lands Act passed in 1872,

¹⁶ *Globe*, February 13, 1879. <http://search.proquest.com/hnpglobeandmail/advanced?accountid=14739>

¹⁷ *Globe*, February 13, 1879. <http://search.proquest.com/hnpglobeandmail/advanced?accountid=14739>

¹⁸ Government of Canada, *Reports of Tenant Farmers’ Delegates on the Dominion of Canada as a Field for Settlement* (Ottawa: Maclean, Roger and Co, 1880), 64.

¹⁹ *A Handy Book for Emigrants*, (Printed by the Department of Agriculture, 1880), 18.

the first year live cattle were shipped to Britain, assumed that land development in the west would follow a similar process as it had in the east. This pattern was defined by small scale stock-raising primarily to supplement other agricultural products; pastureland under this system could only be leased to homesteaders. Furthermore, leases could be cancelled with six months' notice making any large investment towards improvement unattractive.²⁰ However, in 1876 large scale stock-raising in the west had become something that the government wanted to encourage and, as a consequence, the Act was amended.

The amendment allowed for leasing of land to non-residents, companies, and individuals. This was significant because starting a large scale cattle operation required significant capital. Furthermore, the cancellation notice for a lease was extended to two years.²¹ Furthering the attractiveness of ranching on the plains was Section 35 of "The Dominion Land Act" of 1879 which allowed the government to grant leases of unoccupied Dominion land specifically for grazing purposes. In October, 1880, an Order-in-Council was passed stating "It is hereby ordered that, notwithstanding the Order in Council of the 23rd of April 1880, called the 'Health of Animals Order', and while the said order otherwise remains in full force and effect, it is, nevertheless permitted to import cattle and swine from Duluth in the United States of America direct to the Prince Arthur Landing."²² This legislation ordered that duty must be paid on imported stock. However, the concept of paying duties on products imported from the United States, especially Montana, was the norm. Therefore, the duty imposed in 1880 was something that the robust Montana/Alberta borderlands economy could easily work with. Furthermore, as

²⁰ Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West*, 17.

²¹ Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West*, 17.

²² Minister of the Interior, Cattle in Keewatin, Order in Council, October 18-20, 1880, RG2, Privy Council Office, Series A-1-a. <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/orders-council/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=16998>

the Canadian cattle industry gathered momentum and drew the attention of well-connected Canadians, import taxes for ranching materials, including cattle, would be suspended for the greater good of rapidly stocking the Alberta ranges.

Prior to these legislative changes grazing regulations in the territories were poorly defined. Therefore, it is probable that Canadian legislation, much like the booster literature extolling the virtues of the north-west plains, was designed to encourage the expansion of the cattle industry. The Department of Agriculture's goal of expanding this industry was then formalized with the passing of an Order-in-Council in 1881. The OIC granted the lease of government land to corporations or individuals for twenty-one years in parcels that were not to exceed 100,000 acres. The rent was one cent per-acre, per year. The lease required that within three years the lease holder put at least one head of cattle per ten acres.²³ The system envisioned by this type of legislation clearly favored large ranches and reinforced that the government was keen to have investment in the west. The relatively small changes made to land tenure ushered in cattle ranching on a large scale.

Cattle ranchers were present on the Alberta plains during the 1870s but the number of cattle being raised was small and their presence was not used as an indicator for the environmental suitability of the industry. Warren Elofson notes that while the numbers of cattle were steadily increasing in order to help feed the Indigenous population in 1880 there were still only small herds, about 200, on the free grass between the United States border and Calgary.²⁴ In real terms, in 1880 the number of cattle brought into Alberta, mostly from Montana, was a

²³ Alex Johnson and M. Joan MacKinnon. "Alberta Range Cattle Industry 1881-1981: Alberta's Ranching Heritage," *Rangelands* 4, no. 3 (June 1982): 99.

²⁴ Elofson, *So Far and Yet so Close*, 7.

relatively low 1717²⁵ and most of these were small purchases of between 55 and 200.²⁶ By 1881 that number had increased to a still modest 5168 with the largest single purchase from D.H. Davis of 784 cattle.²⁷ However, the result of amended legislation favoring large ranches, the presence of markets for beef, and unrelentingly positive environmental representations from boosters and government led to a massive increase in cattle imported to Alberta.

The evolving Dominion Land Act supported a federally organized period of cattle-raising by allowing for the leasing of large tracts of land. The government altered the process of land development in the Canadian Territories in several significant ways. The new agreement from Ottawa allowed for large corporations and absentee landlords to control large tracts of land, thereby encouraging the Texas system. Furthermore, it made it increasingly difficult for small operations to establish themselves legally in several different, yet interconnected, ways. The new arrangement made obtaining a lease difficult, and without a lease a would-be rancher could not obtain sufficient land to graze his cattle. More importantly, the right to import cattle duty-free from the United States was a right afforded to lease holders in 1882, allowing for the rapid importation of stock from Montana.²⁸ Stockmen of modest size who did not have a lease and those engaged in mixed farming were required to pay the full duty of 20%, a cost that was quite onerous. Perhaps most important to the process of filling the plains with cattle was that Ottawa determined the location of lease lands. More often than not, the best lands went to wealthy eastern investors who had connections, like Matthew Cochrane. As a result, most of the best grazing land ended up in the hands of eastern-backed corporations who had the capital to invest

²⁵ Statement to the Minister of the Interior, June 1, 1880, M234, Cochrane Ranch Company Ltd. Fonds 1881-1892, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

²⁶ Statement, June 1, 1880, Cochrane Ranch Company Ltd. Fonds 1881-1892.

²⁷ Statement, June 1, 1880, Cochrane Ranch Company Ltd. Fonds 1881-1892.

²⁸ Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West*, 20.

in large herds. One option for the small, would-be agriculturalist was to apply for a 160 acre homestead; this too came with its own set of problems related to evolving land legislation. As the lease agreements given to large cattle ranches contained a “no settlement” clause before 1885 and were on the best land, homesteaders were out of luck. Compounding this problem was that the lease cancellation notice had been increased to two years which meant that under the very best circumstances a prospective settler would have to wait upwards of three years to start their homestead. Land use legislation that privileged cattle pushed farmers further north and essentially ceded control of the southern half of the Territories to ranchers, thereby encouraging the Texas system in Alberta.²⁹

Settlers who desired land resented the lease system immensely yet, due to the political clout of leaseholders, government tended to favor ranchers. In 1883 settlers near the Porcupine Hills learned, after plowing the land and building their homes, they were on leased land. The settlers wrote a letter to the Department of the Interior expressing their displeasure and requested that the land be freed from the lease. The Department of the Interior stood firmly with the leaseholders and told the settlers that those leases were in place before they settled, and the lease holder had the right to evict squatters.³⁰ However, as there was no land office in Fort Macleod, an official map showing leased lands was not available, making an official examination into land open to settlement difficult and costly. In 1886 Mr. C.F. Denny complained in the *Macleod Gazette* that because the bulk of the land in the area was leased the land office should be moved from Lethbridge to Fort Macleod.³¹ The friction between ranchers and settlers came to a head in

²⁹ Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West*, 20.

³⁰ Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West*, 47.

³¹ *Lethbridge News*, February 2, 1887. <http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca>

1885 with a meeting of settlers on John Glenn's farm, where farmers formed the Alberta Settlers' Rights Association.

Alberta settlers sent a petition prompting John A. Macdonald to have the Minister of the Interior inspect all leased lands and cancel those leases where conditions, like a lack of stock, had been breached. Leasee's who had given "...the assurance that they were both able and willing to stock them [leases]. It turns out they all lied and merely got their leases for the purpose of selling them" were targeted.³² According to the *Lethbridge News* by 1889 over 600,000 acres of lease land had been cancelled.³³ The amount of land opened for settlement was significant but the Canadian government had not turned on Alberta ranchers. Nevertheless, Ottawa needed to alleviate the settler problem without antagonizing ranchers. The solution was a system that prevented squatters from blocking access to water where "The Minister recommends that such of these lands as are at the disposal of the Government be reserved from sale and settlement, and that they be reserved as approaches to the water and watering places for stock."³⁴ This was acceptable to stock raisers, but other concerns were mounting as well. Stock raisers wanted the stocking requirement for leaseholders reduced to one animal for every thirty acres, from one for every ten. They were also concerned about American cattle illegally grazing in Canada, putting additional pressure on the grasslands. The pressure that cattle ranchers put on the government regarding these concerns helped to develop policy that was favorable to their industry.

The result of the pressure by ranchers was an 1886 order-in-council that created a system preventing settlers from blocking access to water. The government allowed for settlement on

³² Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West*, 51.

³³ *Lethbridge News*, January 2, 1889. <http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca>

³⁴ Minister of the Interior, Watering Places for Stock, Order in Council, November 23, 1886, RG2, Privy Council Office, Series A-1-a. <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/>

leased land, but only for leases signed after 1885. The capitulation to settlers still protected the largest and most well connected ranchers in Alberta.³⁵ The request to reduce the number of cattle per acre was granted in 1888, but at a slightly watered down twenty animals per-acre. The reduction in required stock made it easier for ranchers to reduce the size of their herd if desired, and more difficult for the government to cancel leases.³⁶ Ranchers, even in the face of concessions granted to settlers, had every reason to be pleased with their government. It is important to note, almost every aspect of the legislation passed before 1888 encouraged the Texas system, an unsustainable ranching practice in Alberta. What resulted was, "For a time at least, and to further the purpose of the Dominion, the Canadian government set aside the image of the homestead settler and the family farm and created a 'Big Man's Frontier.'"³⁷

Evolving Canadian legislation regarding the ranching industry was related to overstocking the prairies with cattle in three ways. First, the legislation was clearly an attempt to keep British capital within the Dominion. During the 1870s hundreds of thousands of dollars had gone to American firms, like T.C. Power and I.G. Baker, to supply the police and Indigenous people. By enticing ranchers to set up massive leases and then forcing them to put one animal for every ten acres the government was encouraging the Texas system, which was inappropriate for the north-western plains. The reduction in stock per acre in 1888 came after the hard winter of 1886/1887 and was beneficial to ranchers who needed to run fewer stock and use some of their lease to grow hay. Second, the legislation can be understood as a method to replace one representation of the environment with another. With this legislation encouraging large scale

³⁵ Lethbridge News, January 2, 1889. <http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca>

³⁶ Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West*, 57.

³⁷ Evans, "The Origin of Ranching in Western Canada," 83.

cattle enterprises the government endorsed the west as suitable for more than just extracting furs, pemmican and leather. The changing, and unrealistic perception of the environment is directly related to large leases, overstocking, and the adoption of the Texas system. Last, the changes made to land-use legislation, coupled with lucrative beef contracts, provided a powerful motivation for cattle ranchers to operate in the west.

The Herds in Montana

The lure of cattle ranching in Montana during the 1870s was similar to precious metals the previous decade. Both fit into the booster representation of a natural advantage and the abundant resource of free grass proved to be nearly as enticing as gold, silver and copper. The natural vegetation of Montana and Alberta, including grama and western wheatgrass, had supported millions of bison.³⁸ When the bison were extirpated, cattle ranchers moved in quickly to put it to use. Prior to 1877 cattle numbers were relatively low, the *Helena Weekly Herald* reported only 35, 964 in total for 1870.³⁹ This allowed for the majority of ranches to operate in the well grassed and watered, albeit small, western valleys while the bison still roamed in the eastern half of the Territory. The western valleys were the subject of some of the strongest booster language of the 1870s. For example, the *Philadelphia Evening Telegraph* published “...finer country can nowhere be found for grazing cattle than in Montana, and especially the Yellowstone region. The grasses cure themselves, and thus all winter the cattle can wander around these valleys and find plenty of food to live upon.”⁴⁰ This type of language would prove to be a strong lure for stock-raisers during the latter half of the 1870s.

³⁸ Geoff Cunfer and Bill Waizer eds., *Bison and People on the Great Plains: A Deep Environmental History* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2016). 263.

³⁹ *Helena Weekly Herald*, Helena: Montana. October 27, 1870. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁴⁰ *Evening Telegraph*, Philadelphia, March 9, 1871. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

The cattle boom in Montana followed closely on the heels of the regional borderlands economy of the Power and Baker firms. The prospects for stock raising were met with enthusiasm from some locals, including long-time resident Granville Stuart, who wrote his brother stating “Just think of it. Why we would live about forty years longer by going into the cattle business in a place like that.”⁴¹ The cattle herds destined for Montana’s northern grasslands came from two different directions. The relatively small scale cattle industry that had grown-up around Montana’s mining camps began to move north. They needed to find more open land for their ever expanding herds. During the 1880s another wave of stockmen came from the south and brought with them Texas Longhorns along with other breeds purchased in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Wyoming. This entailed a rapid establishment of both imported and domestic stock in northern Montana by the 1880s.⁴²

The presence of local markets prior to large scale rail penetration were important to early Montana ranchers, much the same as in Alberta. During the 1860s the influx of thousands of gold seekers created the first large scale local market for beef. In 1865 a gold strike was named “Beef Straight” because miners in the area were subsisting on nothing but beef bought from local cattle raisers.⁴³ By 1873, nearing the end of the mining boom, newspapers reported the success had by merchants selling beef in mining camps as a sign of the robust Montana economy.⁴⁴ As the population of Montana grew, pressure on the Indigenous population increased resulting in the formation of several reservations. In addition to creating additional public land for ranchers to exploit, reservations were entitled to food annuities, which were essentially government beef

⁴¹ Letter, Granville Stuart to Thomas Stuart, February 11, 1880, MC61 Box 1-2, Granville Stuart Papers 1863-1918, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁴² Malone, *Montana*, 110.

⁴³ *The Montana Post*, July 29, 1865. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁴⁴ *The Helena Weekly Herald*, June 19, 1873. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

contracts. From 1873 through 1875 rancher Nelson Story was supplying beef and pork annuities destined for the newly formed Crow Reservation.⁴⁵ In 1875, however, the Story contracts were under a fraud investigation. Accusations were made that contracts were not being awarded to the lowest bidder. For example, James Booge of Iowa underbid Story by three cents for the bacon contract but still lost out. On June 2, 1875 Edward P. Smith of the Indian Affairs Commission testified that Booge had not included the charge for freight in his bid. The additional cost of freight made Story's price preferable.⁴⁶ The fact that Story was still less expensive due to freight costs underlines the significance of local markets to Montana ranchers. As military forts were established and an increasing number of Indigenous people were forced onto reservations these markets would grow in size and importance. While not identical to markets in Alberta there was a high degree of similarity. Importantly, by the 1880s ranchers on both sides of the border were competing with each other for contracts, indicating that the significance of local markets did not disappear with the arrival of the railway.

Ranchers in Montana depended on the territorial government for the regulation of their industry. Regulation in Montana was drastically different than in Alberta as the land was primarily free range and land ownership was not common, at least initially. Starting in 1865 the Montana legislature forced stock owners to create and then record a distinctive brand, an important aspect of the Texas system. Further regulations covered summer and winter grazing, round-ups and the handling of stray cattle, a common problem in open range cattle ranching.⁴⁷ By the 1870s *The Helena Weekly Herald* reported additional regulation for breeding stock and

⁴⁵ *Bozeman Avant Courier*, 12 December 1873. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>; *Bozeman Avant Courier*, August 27, 1875, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>; Spence, *Montana*, 42.

⁴⁶ Investigation on the Conduct of Indian Affairs, 43 Congress, 1 session, *House Committee Report No. 778*, 1874. 178-183. Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁴⁷ Malone, *Montana*, 112.

further requirements for reporting brands.⁴⁸ Early legislation in Montana, like Alberta, was designed to encourage the Texas system by regulating it into existence.

A lack of government leases and minimal land ownership made Montana ranchers reliant on public land, an additional factor that favored the Texas system over a fenced ranching operation. There were some clever methods by which ranchers acquired grazing land for a short period of time. Under the Desert Land Act of 1877 “farmers” were permitted to buy up to 640 acres of land for \$1.25 an acre provided they actively engaged in irrigation. The law was noble in its intention but was easily abused. Ranchers would buy the land and then make a token irrigation effort while grazing their cattle. When the three year period was up they would return the land to the government having grazed it nearly for free.⁴⁹ The lack of ownership would become problematic during the 1880s when, as Granville Stuart wrote, “...the ranges were free to all, and no man could say, with authority, when a range was overstocked.”⁵⁰

The success of ranching and the decline of mining caused a glut of cattle and a depressed price during the 1870s. This pushed cattle raisers to seek new markets. For example, in 1868 Montana cattle were used to fill a Union Pacific contract in Wyoming and by the early 1870s could be found in all over that state. At the same time other cattlemen and the Baker and Power firms, were looking to Canada and North Dakota for markets. John McDougall trailed cattle north into Canada in the 1870s and numerous ranchers sold meat to miners in the Black Hills.⁵¹ The long cattle drives were part of the pattern of stock raising at the time. The isolation from the agricultural frontier had the benefit of free grass and, according to boosters, ample water and an

⁴⁸ *The Montana Weekly Herald*, January 11, 1872. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁴⁹ Paul Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968).

⁵⁰ Malone, *Montana*, 124.

⁵¹ Malone, *Montana*, 110.

amiable climate but it was still relatively isolated. The cattle-drive, therefore, was a necessary aspect of the free range industry.

While the drive was necessary it was also subjected to depredation by Indigenous people who had called the plains home for generations. The Blackfoot, Crow, Sioux, Gros Venture and Assiniboine were the most numerous groups. Through the use of treaties prior to 1871 and then by executive order, the federal policy regarding Indigenous people in Montana was to whittle down their land, an ongoing process that benefitted ranchers. A series of treaties, agreements (often broken) and atrocities from 1850 to the 1870s ended with the majority of Montana Indigenous people being confined to reservations.⁵² In 1871 the Flat Head, who were living in the Bitterroot Valley, were removed to the Jocko Agency at the urging of Governor Benjamin Potts. The most beneficial development for Montana ranchers was, in 1873-1874, the Crow were moved from the Yellowstone to the Judith Basin opening up vast grasslands in northern Montana.⁵³ The writing was on the wall for the Indigenous people of northern Montana; their lands were going to continue to shrink in order to make room for White settlers and cattle. Governor Potts' attitude toward the Indigenous population in Montana was typical for the time. His administration worked to open land occupied by Indigenous people to White settlers, especially ranchers.

At the end of the 1870s beef prices were, once again, on the upswing further reinforcing booster representations of the grasslands, water, climate and opportunities inherent in cattle ranching. A further enticement for cattle ranching in Montana was that a large investment was not necessary, a significant difference than in Alberta. Under the Homestead Act of 1862 a man

⁵² Clark C. Spence, *Montana: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1978). 53-63.

⁵³ Clark C. Spence, *Territorial Politics and Government in Montana, 1864-1889* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1975). 114.

could easily acquire 160 acres, which was enough to form the heart of a ranch. From there, as long as the rancher was not overburdened by scruples, public land could be grazed and water access fenced, for free. However, in the absence of land ownership and governance Montana ranchers were forced to come to an understanding of how land was going to be used. The system was the “law of customary range” which was codified in 1877. Essentially, the system established a priority right to public property; that right was then published in local newspapers. For example, after customary range was claimed it was misdemeanor for competitors to drive that stock away. Ranchers who broke these rules were ostracized both socially and economically.⁵⁴ While this arrangement for the use of public land sounds civilized it was often problematic. When a dispute about range rights arose, civil courts were the only legal recourse available to enforce a rancher’s right to their pasture. Long delays in the legal process led to numerous incidents of vigilantism.

Both the Power and Baker firms had grown rich in their relationship with the cattle industry. Within the cattle industry investment in other parts of the west, like Texas, were significant.⁵⁵ With respect to the weather, 1880-1882 were relatively mild allowing cattle to come through the winter without requiring winter feed.⁵⁶ In combination these factors reinforced the veracity of booster representations of the northern plains and led newcomers to wholeheartedly believe in them. The often referred to “Classical Period” of cattle ranching where the cattleman had almost uncontested control over the plains came relatively late to Montana. The main reasons were Montana’s geographic isolation and overall slow growth. However, when

⁵⁴ Spence, *Territorial Politics*, 208.

⁵⁵ Matthew Todd, “Now May be Heard a Discouraging Word: The Impact of Climate Fluctuation on Texas Ranching in the 1880s” (MA Thesis, University of Saskatchewan). 19-36.

⁵⁶ *The River Press*, February 25, 1882. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

the environmental and economic representations were subsumed by “boosters” ranchers, locally and from out of the Territory, bought into the grasslands as a viable location to raise thousands of cattle.

In 1882, on the cusp of the cattle boom in Montana and Alberta, the *Cincinnati Gazette* wrote “In the region traversed by the Northern Pacific lie boundless, gateless and fenceless pastures of public domain, where cattle can be grown and fattened with little operating expense save that of a few cowboys, some corrals and a branding iron. There a poor man can grow rich while a rich man can double or treble his capital.”⁵⁷ The great range boom for the Montana/Alberta borderlands mounted through the 1880s. The fact that the two locations had vastly different methods of land ownership did not mean that land-use was different. The grasslands of both Alberta and Montana were subject to the same booster representations and, as a consequence, ranchers on both sides of the border fundamentally misunderstood their environment. The boom, therefore, was predicated on booster representations of the grasslands and facilitated by a pre-existing regional economy that allowed for the rapid importation of cattle into Alberta from Montana.

⁵⁷ *Cincinnati Gazette*, March 2, 1882. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

Chapter Four: Ranching in a Misunderstood Alberta Environment

Broadly speaking, settling the west in Canada was tied to the goal of creating a cross-continental nation. A west settled through immigration, from within Canada and abroad, was bipartisan as the result would provide natural products and a market for finished goods. During the 1870s the Macdonald government sent surveyors west to parcel up the land into townships, sections and quarter sections. The Dominion Land Act of 1872 allowed for men, aged 21 or older to apply for a homestead of 160 acres after they had paid a \$10 registration fee.¹ The basis of this system was that the west was to become prime agricultural land capable of supporting towns and cities that were sure to follow on the heels of the plow. However, the problem was that the climate of southern Alberta was considered too arid and therefore not suitable for a large agricultural base. The result was that ranching would come to dominate in southern Alberta.

The Walrond Ranch and Cochrane Ranch, two of the three case studies used here, were two of what David Breen called the “venerable giants” of the early cattle industry in Canada.² The Walrond was named for its principal backer Sir John Walrond Walrond, who owned large estates in the county of Devon, England. In a similar vein, the Cochrane Ranch was named after Senator Matthew Cochrane, who was a close friend of Sir John Pope, the Minister of Agriculture. What made these operations “giants” was their total acreage. Through clever leasing these ranches far exceeded the 100,000 acre limit imposed by the Dominion government. This meant in Alberta by 1884, two-thirds of all stocked land was controlled by ten companies and nearly 50 per cent was in the control of just four.³ While it would seem as though there was no room for smaller operations during the early 1880s Alfred Cross started his A7 ranch in 1885.

¹ Palmer, *Alberta: A New History*, 52.

² Breen, *The Canadian Prairie West*, 43.

³ Palmer, *Alberta*, 52.

The A7, unlike the “venerable giants”, operated on a few thousand acres and was financed with Canadian money.

Ranching was present in southern Alberta during the early 1870s but it was not until after 1877 that retired NWMP officers and the Baker and Power firms started to bring in large numbers of stock. Two years later the British government enacted an embargo on American cattle making ranching in Alberta economically viable, even without a railway. In 1881, the Canadian government amended the Dominion Land Act allowing the purchase of large ranches, like the Cochrane and Walrond, and made access for homesteaders increasingly difficult. Not surprisingly, the 1880s saw a boom in ranches on the Alberta prairies. Conservative Senator Matthew Cochrane, Duncan McEachran (with Sir Walrond) and Alfred Cross established ranches on the open plains of Alberta using a land-lease system that was unique in North America. What was not unique, however, was the type of booster representations describing the environment. This type of information was commonly applied to the entire Great Plains, from Alberta to Texas. As a consequence, the argument that “Their founders’ single intention was to reap the rewards of a bountiful frontier environment quickly and with as little effort as possible; and few of them understood the challenges that lay ahead” falls slightly short.⁴ The ubiquity of booster representations allowed for a fundamental misunderstanding of the environment, which led to the importation of inadequate ranching methods.

⁴ Elofson, *Somebody Else’s Money*. 2.

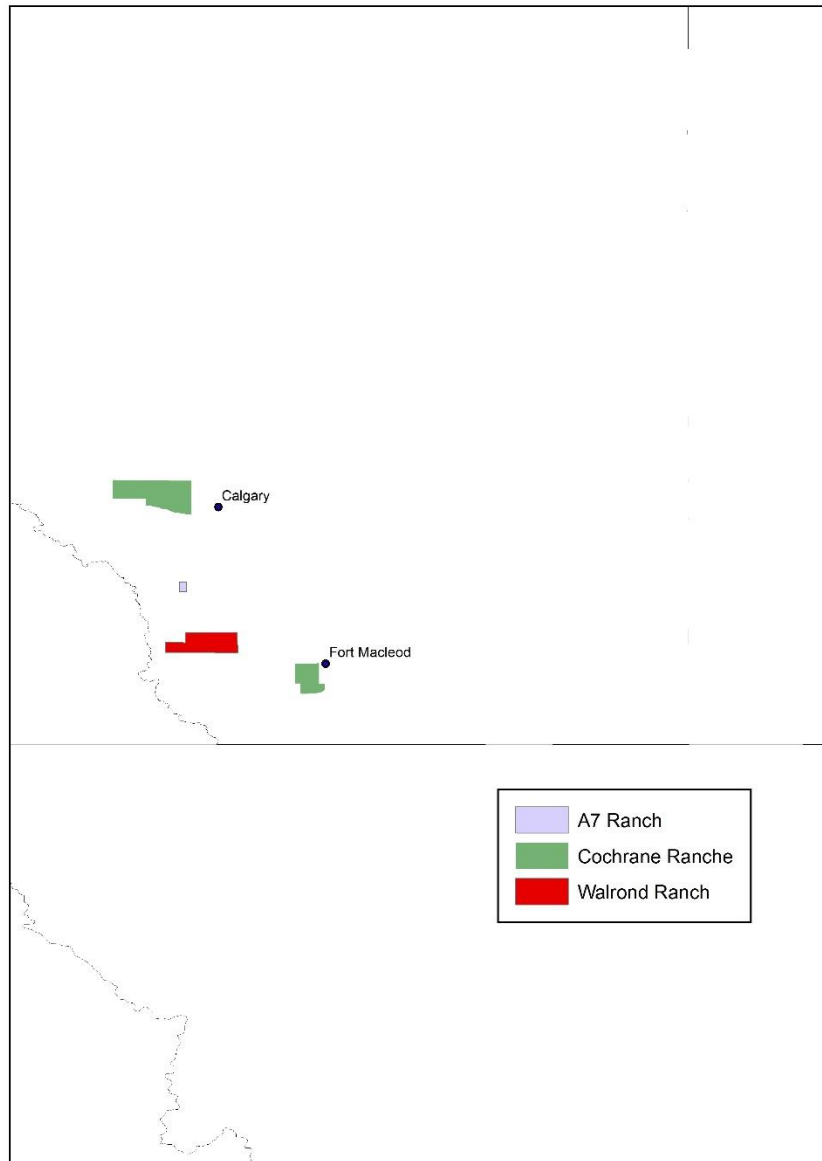


Figure 2: The leases for the Cochrane, Walrond and A7 Ranches. The map illustrates the distance cattle were "trailed" from Montana.

The Cochrane Rancho Company

By 1882, Senator Matthew Cochrane owned one of the largest cattle operations in western Canada and was instrumental in the development of the early cattle industry in Alberta.

In a letter to John A. Macdonald, Cochrane outlined his plans:

I have for some time past been making arrangements to establish a Stock Farm in the North West; with the view of affording emigrants settling in that part of the Dominion an opportunity of stocking their farms with improved breeds of cattle and horses, and also in the belief that a large foreign trade can be developed in the export of stock from the Canadian North West. At the present time settlers going into the new Territory are compelled either to transport their stock from Ontario, at an expense usually in excess of their means, or they are forced to purchase inferior animals at high prices from the United States.⁵

This quotation touches on two important points for the history of cattle-raising in Alberta. First, it illustrates the political and economic logic behind deviating from the eastern Canadian model of land use. In eastern Canada stock raising was done in conjunction with other farming practices. This is important for the environmental history of the Great Plains because large scale ranching was common in Southern Alberta. Furthermore, using land in this way requires extensive experience and knowledge of the interrelationship between climate, grass, animals and water which was not available at the time. Cochrane illustrates his experience raising cattle in the same letter when, after outlining his plan to purchase bulls from England, he also requires enough land beyond his lease to build “a farm on which to erect the necessary buildings for a certain amount of winter protection and forage—as I deem it prudent in testing what is largely an experiment to be provided with both food and stabling in case of an usually severe winter.”⁶ This

⁵ Letter, Matthew Cochrane to John Alexander Macdonald, December 17, 1880, M1303, Cochrane Rancho Company Ltd. Fonds 1891-1892, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

⁶ Letter, Matthew Cochrane to John Alexander Macdonald, December 17, 1880, Cochrane Rancho Company Ltd. Fonds 1892-1892.

concern would become prophetic during the winter of 1883. His remark on American cattle being expensive and inferior alludes to the proposed changes provided to leaseholders where they could import cattle duty free.

In March of 1882 the shipping of cattle duty-free was instituted as an exclusive right to leaseholders. Given the close relationship between the emerging Canadian cattle industry and the Canadian government this is hardly surprising. However, the tax exempt status for lease-holders also reinforced the positive perception of the environment from both ranchers and the government and the desire for the North-West grasslands to be repopulated with cattle as quickly as possible. The improved atmosphere for investment is clearly indicated in the lease agreement for Cochrane which stated “Cattle, Horses and other stock purchased...irrespective of age or sex to be limited during the present and following year, (1881 and 1882) free of duty if for the purpose of stocking said leased range. Farm implements, waggon[sic], Harness, Saddlery, Tents required for ranching business to be admitted duty free.”⁷ The terms of this lease, and the lease legislation in and of itself, indicate a strong desire from the Canadian government to establish a ranching presence in the Northwest. Furthermore, the tax exemption from cattle and farm implements underlines the regional economy engendered during the 1870s. The Power and Baker firms would be called upon to supply cattle, horses and general ranching supplies to many Alberta operations including the Cochrane and Walrond.

The range had to be filled with animals that were well suited for export to Britain. However, due to booster representations of the environment, what ranchers did not consider (why would they?) was if the animals were suited to the climate, grasses and water of the north-

⁷ Cochrane Lease, 1881, M1303, Cochrane Ranch Company Ltd. Fonds 1881-1892, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

western plains. Imported cattle that were not well adapted to Alberta was a problem evident during the first drive of cattle to the Cochrane range, and in winter of 1883. In April, 1881 the *Montreal Gazette* wrote that the Dominion Line steamship had arrived in Canada carrying the largest shipment of purebred cattle ever. The shipment was comprised of Angus, Hereford and Shorthorn bulls all of which were destined for the Cochrane Ranch.⁸ The purchase of purebred cattle from England, as opposed to the United States, was likely for two reasons. First, Cochrane intended on selling to the international market and English consumers wanted English cattle. Second, within two years a quarantine on American breeding stock was put in place to protect from pleuro-pneumonia. By bringing cattle in Cochrane was ensuring that his export animals were suitable for England.

Cochrane's connections in Ottawa allowed him to negotiate for the best land available. In a letter to the Deputy Minister of the Interior he wrote:

...I may, after personal inspection, decide to locate in quite a different part from that which you have assigned to me even approximately, and before I go into the country I want authority to select where I choose, irrespective of any applications made by others, provided I take it in a block.⁹

The day after sending this letter Cochrane began his journey to the territories. He travelled first to Montreal and then to Montana by train. This was the same route that brought Canadian goods to Power and Baker.¹⁰ Cochrane arrived in Ft. Benton, Montana where he bought a buckboard and rode north into Canada's fescue grasslands. For his home range he chose an area 20km west of Calgary, near to where the modern town of Cochrane stands today. Veterinarian and Canadian

⁸ Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 59.

⁹ Letter, Matthew Cochrane to John Alexander Macdonald, May 31, 1881, M1303, Cochrane Ranch Company Ltd. Fonds 1881-1892, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

¹⁰ Letter, Matthew Cochrane to John Alexander Macdonald, May 31, 1881, M1303, Cochrane Ranch Company Ltd. Fonds 1881-1892.

Quarantine Inspector Duncan McEachran, an investor in the Cochrane Ranche, described the range to a Montreal newspaper like this

The land is rolling, consisting of numerous grassy hills, plateau and bottom lands, intersecting here and there by streams of considerable size issuing from never-failing springs. The water is cool and clear...The site selected for the ranch building is a beautiful one, a level plateau covered with rich pasture, on the north bank of the Bow River, about forty feet above the level of the water...in a few years, probably, it will be fenced in and divided into beautiful fields with sheds and corrals necessary for the segregation of the different breeds of the male and female animals and otherwise assume the features of civilization.¹¹

This description reinforces how the north-western plains were populated with cattle, the positive representations of the land and the idea that cattle ranching and civilization were inextricably connected. Ironically enough, the ranching infrastructure described by McEachran was not built until several environmental disasters had made it absolutely necessary. This description was not for a government official, but for mass consumption. The message was clear, for the cattle business the west was ideal.

The Cochrane range, with some additional land purchased later, would require both extensive and capital intensive improvements before Cochrane's vision of a large cattle operation could emerge. In a letter to the department of the Interior in July, 1881 he wrote,

I shall commence by placing on the range during the coming summer - a heard of say 8,000 breeding cows - together with say 300 to 400 thoroughbred bulls - it is also intended to conduct the breeding of Horse and Sheep on our extensive scale, the object of breeding the best of the different classes of stock being kept steadily in view - the enclosing of large areas of ground with proper fencing will therefore be immediately required - the investment in the project will amount to about \$500,000 within two years.¹²

¹¹ Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 60.

¹² Letter, Matthew Cochrane to the Department of the Interior, July, 1881, M1303, Cochrane Ranche Company Ltd. Fonds 1881-1892, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

Ultimately, with a combination of lease and purchased land Cochrane acquired 109,000 acres along the Bow River, a parcel stretching from Calgary to the Rocky Mountains. Furthermore, Cochrane had ensured that he was surrounded by sympathetic neighbors and family whose land would be available should he require additional grass. On the northeast boundary of the Cochrane lease was Senator A.W. Ogilvie, a flour-milling tycoon and business acquaintance of Cochrane's, who leased 34,000 acres. Also, Edward A. Baynes, Ogilvie's son-in-law, who leased 50,000 adjoining acres¹³ All total, Cochrane had over 300,000 acres of grassland under his "control" for what he called "the successful inauguration of improved stock breeding on an extensive scale in the Territories."¹⁴

The inaugural herd purchased by Cochrane in Montana to begin "improved stock-raising on an extensive scale" numbered about 7,000. The cost was disappointing to James Walker, the man in charge of purchasing cattle, as he was negotiating during an upswing in the American cattle boom. Walker acquired a large herd from four different sources in Montana and Idaho at 16\$ a head.¹⁵ The herd was delivered to representatives of the I.G. Baker Company at the border. From the border Cochrane had contracted the Baker firm to deliver the herd to his lands west of Calgary. For logistical purposes the herd was divided into two groups, one consisting of steers and the other of cows and calves. From the perspective of Cochrane and other large ranchers one of the early strengths of the Alberta cattle industry was its access to a borderlands regional economy. From Fort Benton ranchers could buy cattle, ranching supplies, and farming implements all of which were delivered to their lease. However, the rapidity with which

¹³ Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 67.

¹⁴ Letter, Matthew Cochrane to the Department of the Interior, July, 1881, Cochrane Ranch Company Ltd. Fonds 1881-1892.

¹⁵ Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 67.

Canadian ranches were stocked was also detrimental. Starting a ranch with 7,000 cattle would have been difficult even if Alberta ranchers had accurate environmental information. The fact that they were only provided with misleading, although believable, booster representations made the forthcoming disasters all the more likely.

In the months after the import duty was lifted the number of cattle purchased and imported skyrocketed to 23,103. The largest single purchase of 6634 cattle was made by the Cochrane Ranch Co. in April, 1882.¹⁶ The large single purchase by Cochrane was followed by additional purchases of 500 cattle in November and 2,400 on March 24, 1883 and 3732 on March 30, 1883.¹⁷ Within a few years the Cochrane Ranch had imported 14,648 head of cattle. While that number seems high, part of the legislation allowing for large leases stipulated that one head of cattle was required for every 10 acres. Considering that Cochrane was personally in control of 109,000 acres he was almost exactly within the confines of the legislation. The purpose of setting the limit on the number of cattle per acre was to prevent overstocking. However, most cattlemen, especially the larger operations, did not want to lose their lease and stocked the absolute maximum. Considering that environmental information at the time was inherently flawed, having the maximum number of cattle became problematic. The number of cattle and the size of Cochrane's range would prove to be a hindrance during several years of hard winters, drought and prairie fires. However, from his perspective, within a decade Government reports and legislation encouraging the large scale importation of cattle had proved successful.

¹⁶ Cochrane Lease, 1881, Cochrane Ranch Company Ltd. Fonds 1881-1892.

¹⁷ Cochrane Lease, 1881, Cochrane Ranch Company Ltd. Fonds 1881-1892.

Senator Matthew Cochrane represents one facet of how Southern Alberta was filled with cattle. Cochrane's political allegiances allowed him to claim 100,000 acres of the best lands available. He was also able to use family and business connections to control an additional 200,000 acres. Through his and other rancher's efforts it is also probable that the duties imposed on animals and ranching equipment were suspended, at least for a time. Cochrane was a well-connected rancher who saw the grasslands as a business venture. He was a rancher who gave the Canadian plains its British feel in character and politics and one who was both willing and able to put 14,648 cattle, not to mention horses and sheep, onto the grasslands.

Alfred Cross and the A7 Ranch

Cochrane, however, was not the only type of rancher to see a future in the on the Southern Alberta grasslands. On November 12, 1883 a young Alfred Earnest Cross, after attending Bryant and Stratton Business College in Montreal and agricultural college in Guelph, wrote a term paper titled "Canadian Export of Beef with Special Reference to Veterinary Science." The exam was part of the requirements for his veterinary science degree. Among his instructors was Dr. Duncan McEachran, the man responsible for improving Canadian shipping of live cattle and one of the investors in the Cochrane Ranch Cattle Company and later the Walrond Ranch. In his introduction Cross wrote

...gentlemen the study which I bring before you tonight embraces such a large field, that it gives ample room for anyone who knows anything at all about it, to express their ideas. It is a very important one not only to the agriculturalist veterinarian, shipper but to the country in general as it brings a large revenue. It has developed into a large trade as I will presently show to you and the cattle have made no small name for themselves in the British market

I have divided the subject up into the following headings—

1. Trade, how it has increased so rapidly and to such an extent
2. Climate and soil adapted to raising cattle

3. History of prominent breeds and ones best adapted
4. Most profitable way of feeding and raising
5. Most important diseases their precautions and treatment¹⁸

Considering how Cross divided the subject it would seem that he was well-versed in eastern stock raising, especially with respect to the recent spread of disease in European live-stock and subsequent cull in both British and German cattle. Furthermore, it is probable that Cross was familiar with western ranching because information on the west was readily available in Montreal. Cross, as noted by historian Henry Klassen, had read about western ranching as a boy and so he believed that southwestern Alberta was an ideal bioregion for an emerging cattle industry. For Cross, the representations of the environment were of a moderate climate and abundant grasses. Furthermore, the area generally was virtually free of frontier violence and was situated to benefit from the Canada Pacific Railway and the borderlands economic region.¹⁹ Cross, like Cochrane, saw a great deal of possibility in the open grasslands of the territories. The live cattle trade had increased exponentially over the previous years and there was no reason to believe that it would abate any time soon. On a voyage to Montreal from England, Cross rode with a man who had done a trial run of live cattle. In his 1883 term paper he recalled that man's trip was successful and that he "has realized a handsome profit on his new enterprise."²⁰ From this anecdote Cross segued into the numbers for each year leading up to 1883 to illustrate that his idea for ranching in the territories (near Calgary) was economically feasible. The increases in shipping, as noted by Cross, were: 1877 – 6,940 cattle; 1878 – 18,655 cattle; 1879 – 25,009

¹⁸ Alfred Cross Exam, 1883, Cross Family Fonds 1836-1987, M339.

¹⁹ Henry Klassen, "Entrepreneurship in the Canadian West: The Enterprises of A.E. Cross, 1886-1920," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1991), 316.

²⁰ Cross Exam, 1883, Cross Family Fonds 1836-1987.

cattle; 1880 – 50,905 cattle; 1881 – 45,535 cattle; 1882 – 35,735 cattle.²¹ While Cross was citing numbers of cattle being shipped to England there was no reason for him to think that cattle raised in Alberta could not also be exported.

Cross explained that the decrease from 1880-1882 was caused by the successes of the previous years. He suggests that because the market was strong shippers bought all available cattle and suitable replacement cattle, ones that were “up to the standard of roast beef which the English stomach seems to yearn for”, required time to put on weight.²² A required weight, for both consumers and sellers, meant that the cattle business in the territories could bring animals around to the standard expected by British consumers in three years and that the cattle industry “of British America which will develop into one of the most important industries of Canada if not the Greatest.”²³ Despite the small scale of Cross’s Alberta ranch, based on his primary documents he was as enthusiastic as any booster.

The second section of Cross’s exam, “Climate and Soil adapted to raising cattle”, is, tellingly, the shortest and is lacking in critical analysis. This uninformative section indicates the lack of accurate information available at this time. Perhaps more importantly, it underlined the type of booster representations available. He was satisfied to state that:

Climate; it cannot be surpassed for its healthy and invigorating qualities and freedom from disease. The summer cattle are allowed to graze on the most luxurial [sic] pasture well supplied with pure water, large areas to run over where they can obtain the great varieties of herbs necessary for health and growing muscles and laying on fat. The winter season is somewhat a bully as I have heard Americans say but this does not prevent the animals from thriving as they are closed in comfortable houses where proper temperature is maintained.²⁴

²¹ Cross Exam, 1883, Cross Family Fonds 1836-1987.

²² Cross Exam, 1883, Cross Family Fonds 1836-1987.

²³ Cross Exam, 1883, Cross Family Fonds 1836-1987.

²⁴ Cross Exam, 1883, Cross Family Fonds 1836-1987.

Time would prove Cross' assessment incorrect. However, for the purpose of this discussion it is important to note that Cross was echoing both the government and media's representations of inexhaustible land and tremendous profits. For example, an exchange in the *Breeders Gazette* in 1883 reported that,

a good sized steer when it is fit for the butcher market will bring from \$45 to \$60. The same animal at its birth was worth about \$5.00. He has run on the plains and cropped the grass from the public domain for four or five years, and now, with scarcely any expense to his owner, is worth \$40 more than when he started his pilgrimage. A thousand of these animals are kept nearly as cheaply as a single one, so with a thousand as a starter and with an investment of but \$5,000 in the start, in four years the stock raiser has made from \$40,000 to \$45,000.²⁵

Cross had bought into the representations that the west was a land of limitless ranching potential that required cattle, land and little else. In William Cronon's work on booster representations for Chicago he emphasized that a key to boosterism was the guarantee of large profits requiring very little effort.²⁶ The Alberta cattle industry was certainly following that trend.

Before ever setting foot on a train heading west to the territories, let alone having seen a single blade of prairie grass, Cross argued that

In my opinion the most profitable way of raising beef is on the western prairies of the U.S. and Canada. In raising and feeding on the prairies there is no long winter to house cattle and feed them inside with very great expense, cattle on the plains live out all winter and in the majority of the cases seldom seen all winter but have to forage for themselves on the dried prairie grass, which gets cured about the end of July²⁷

With respect to his exam, Cross no longer seems concerned that cattle needed to be housed during the winter, indicating that he had further bought into the booster message. Furthermore,

²⁵ Osgood, *The Day of the Cattleman*, 86.

²⁶ Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 35.

²⁷ Cross Exam, 1883, Cross Family Fonds 1836-1987.

this quotation indicates Cross' intention of using the Texas system for managing cattle, a method of ranching that would prove entirely inappropriate for the Alberta grasslands. However, based on booster representations of the climate and grasslands Cross, along with most other ranchers, believed it was suitable. In 1884, just one year after writing his veterinary exam, Cross was working on the Cochrane ranch as its assistant manager, bookkeeper, and veterinary surgeon. These positions were given to him by his former instructor Dr. Duncan McEachran.

For Cross, working on a ranch was a logical first step, but would hardly satisfy the entrepreneurial drive evident in his writing. By 1885 Cross, staying true to his plans, was venturing north of the Cochrane range looking for a lease of his own. In an 1885 letter to his father Cross wrote "I returned last Tuesday from a trip of eight days top of the country north of here, to see what sort of a ranching country it would make..."²⁸ In the same lengthy letter Cross suggested to his father that he intended to start up his own operation using either polled Angus or shorthorn cattle. Cross was enough of a business man to mention to his father "I trust you will not mention anything of this plan of mine outside the family, or as anyone's opinions that would likely mention the matter to any of the directors of this company as I expect they would not like me leaving or taking up a ranch up this creek..."²⁹ In 1886, following on the heels of that letter, Alfred Cross was able to convince his brothers to leave Montreal and join a family-owned livestock business.

The brothers formed the Cross Bros. firm and established a herd of 428 shorthorn cattle, the breed that Alfred Cross referred to as "the most noble breed...which in my opinion stands at the top of the tree" on a range at the headwaters of Mosquito Creek, roughly fifty miles from the

²⁸ Letter, Alfred Cross to Alexander Selkirk Cross, March, 1885, M1543, Cross Family Fonds 1836-1987, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

²⁹ Letter, Alfred Cross to Alexander Selkirk Cross, March, 1885, Cross Family Fonds 1836-1987.

city of Calgary.³⁰ The 160 acres near Mosquito Creek served as a homestead and headquarters of the firm while the bulk of the range set aside for cattle was located on 22,000 acres, leased at two cents an acre, near the Little Bow River.³¹ In a letter to his father written a year previously Cross identified this area as having “...the most luxurial [sic] grass, 800 to 1,000 tons of hay can be cut without moving the mower off the place”³² so it is not surprising that he chose to set up his operation in this area. The cattle to acres ratio for Cross was well within the limits recognized by the Canadian government to prevent overstocking. In fact, he was close to having too few in order to maintain his lease. From that perspective Cross should have been advantageously positioned to thrive, yet, as will be seen, he struggled with the same environmental problems as larger operations.

The Walrond Ranche

The Walrond Ranch, much like the Cochrane, was the product of several years of political maneuvering coupled with environmental and economic boosterism. The legislation that resulted favored large ranchers over small farmers. Dr. Duncan McEachran, who was the Walrond vice president and managing director, got his start on the Cochrane Ranch in 1881. During the winter of 1882 McEachran was in contact with members of the Walrond family and convinced them of Alberta ranching’s economic potential. Warren Elofson describes McEachran as the “fantasy weaver” whose faith in the venture was both unrealistic and unchecked.³³

³⁰ Letter, Alfred Cross Exam, 1883, Cross Family Fonds 1836-1987.

³¹ Canada, Department of the Interior, Privy Council Minutes, 16 September, 1886, <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/orders-council/Pages/orders-in-council.aspx>.

³² Alfred Cross to Alexander Selkirk Cross, March, 1885, Cross Family Fonds 1836-1987.

³³ Elofson, *Somebody Else’s Money*, 2.

However, it was not until after the winter of 1883 that he moved from the Cochrane with the intention of starting the Walrond.³⁴

The land that McEachran selected for the Walrond was some of the best in Alberta along the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The lease itself consisted of two large blocks west and northwest of Fort Macleod.³⁵ The first Order in Council from February 20, 1883 described the Walrond grazing property as “The west halves of Townships Twelve, Thirteen and Fourteen in Range Three, and town Townships Twelve, Thirteen and Fourteen in Range Four, all west of the Fifth Meridian, containing one hundred thousand acres more or less.”³⁶ A second application awarded “Those portions north of the north fork of Old Man River of Townships numbers Ten in Ranges One, Two and Three, Townships numbered Eleven in Ranges Two and Three, all west of the Fifth Principal Meridian, containing one hundred thousand acres more or less.”³⁷ A final Order in Council was filed asking for adjacent lands, which was accepted on October 10, 1883.³⁸ When all the land was accounted for the total acreage acquired was, at 260,000, significant. Like many large ranches in the Canadian and American Great Plains the Walrond was heavily financed with British capital totaling \$500,000.³⁹ At the onset the ranch was backed by seven investors who each owned one share worth \$12,500. Importantly, because the Walrond had numerous investors they were able to obtain more than the 100,000 acre maximum. This was

³⁴ Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money*, 35.

³⁵ Palmer, *Alberta*, 52.

³⁶ Minister of the Interior, Grazing Lands, West 5th Meridian Alberta, to A. Walrond, Collampton, Devon, England, Orders in Council, February 21-22, 1883, RG2, Privy Council Office, Series A-1-a. <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/orders-council/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=21213>

³⁷ Minister of the Interior, Grazing Lands, February 21-22, 1883. <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/orders-council/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=21213>

³⁸ Minister of the Interior, Grazing Lands, Alberta, Granted to Sir. John Walrond by O.C. Orders in Council, October 10, 1883, RG2, Privy Council Office, Series A-1-a. <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/orders-council/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=25008>

³⁹ *The Benton Weekly Record*, June 9, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

done by having several Walrond family members and others secure leases. Historian Warren Elofson described the investors as British gentlemen who wanted to increase their prestige though large landholding in the New World.⁴⁰ It was the significant changes to the Dominion Land Act in 1881 that allowed for this. In May, 1883 the Walrond agreement was drawn-up and the ranch was registered.

Sir John Walrond thought that having Duncan McEachran as managing director was a shrewd decision, and on the surface it was. McEachran, even before working with Matthew Cochrane, was a renowned livestock expert. He was also well-connected politically and within the Montana/Alberta regional economy from his years on the Cochrane Ranch. However, as the Walrond built up its stock it began to run into problems. The problems were based on McEachran's misunderstanding of the environment. Compounding these problems McEachran was slow to temper his optimism for large scale cattle ranching in Alberta to something more realistic. The first agreement between McEachran and the Walrond stipulated that he accept shares that were fully paid instead of a salary. The shares were worth £500 and were awarded to him at regular intervals, between 1883 and 1887. While it may seem like exchanging shares for salary was risky should the ranch prosper, as everyone involved believed it would, McEachran was entitled to dividends based on his shares. This prospect of earning dividends was enticing to McEachran. For other investors it was advantageous as well because it tied their manager's financial well-being to the success of the operation.⁴¹ In Elofson's work McEachran's misunderstanding of the environment is less important than his desire to post strong dividends.⁴² While McEachran's financial interest was clear, many of the problems encountered by the

⁴⁰ Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money*, 8.

⁴¹ Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money*. 39.

⁴² Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money*.

Walrond ranch were similar to other ranchers in the area indicating there was a widespread misperception of the Alberta environment. McEachran was an unabashed optimist and booster for both the west and the cattle industry itself. When McEachran's optimism was coupled with booster representations regarding ranching's suitability to the environment generally, numerous environmental problems emerged.

The first major purchase of stock for the Walrond came in 1883 when McEachran traveled to Montana to purchase the Judith Cattle Company's herd from T.C. Power. The sale was noted in the *Benton Weekly Record*, *The River Press*, and the *Semi-Weekly Miner* published in Butte. The *Benton Weekly Record* noted that "the present purchase will give them about 5,000 head, counting calves...We understand that they have twenty-one Hereford bulls on the Helena coming up the river, and thirty high-grade Short-horn bulls have been purchased from Con Kohrs in addition to the bulls now in the herd...The drive is expected to start from Warm Spring ranche ...and will be driven slowly so as to reach the ranche in as good condition as possible and before winter sets in."⁴³ With respect to the Montana/Alberta regional economy the article also noted that "It is evident that the grazing lands of the Dominion will soon be stocked with the best blood of Montana, improved by pure bred bulls from Scotland and England, and we predict a great fortune for cattle raising in that rich pasture land from the boundary line to Morleville."⁴⁴ Ultimately, the herd only totaled 3,125 because in the Judith herd there were not 5,000 suitable cattle. In this sense, suitable meant young enough that they would not be sold in fewer than two years. Any older stock were subject to an import tax.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the first cattle purchase, and

⁴³ *The Benton Weekly Record*, June 9, 1883.

⁴⁴ *The Benton Weekly Record*, June 9, 1883.

⁴⁵ Cattle Import Numbers, 1883, M1303, Cochrane Ranche Company Ltd. Fonds 1881-1892, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

several subsequent ones, indicate that McEachran's optimism for the carrying capacity of his range was high.

Alfred Cross, Duncan McEachran and Matthew Cochrane moved west with a fundamentally flawed understanding of the north-western plains. The environment in Southern Alberta during this crucial decade was, and still is, variable with respect to rainfall and temperature. Trends in climate are often masked by short term weather events, which are part of the natural climate process. However, where weather records are rare, like in the Canadian west between the 1840s and 1890s, variability in weather can influence perception of climate. The confusion between weather and climate where records were lacking proved to be beneficial for politicians who were encouraging western expansion. The disadvantage indicated by Cross's discussion of climate was that ranchers were moving into a region with very little useable information.

Montana

The often referred to "Classical Period" of cattle ranching, where the cattleman had almost uncontested control over the plains, began during the 1870s in Montana. The main reasons for Montana's relatively late start for cattle ranching compared to neighboring territories were its isolation and overall slow growth. However, in the 1870s representations for Montana grasslands, water, economic stability and climate were taken up by "boosters." Ranchers, both locally and from out of the Territory, bought into the grasslands as a viable location to raise thousands of cattle.

Prior to the 1870s cattle were brought to Montana as a food source for emigrants heading west, or fur traders living in the Territory. Richard Grant, a former fur trader, and his son John

Grant built their herd during the early 1860s by trading emigrants for their footsore cattle. Those cattle were then fattened up on grass and re-sold the following year to the next wave of migrants. Cattle ranching in Montana could have stayed a cottage industry if not for several well publicized gold strikes. It was the influx of gold seekers that expanded the market for beef and enterprising locals and newcomers seized the opportunity to make their fortune. For example, Missourian D.A.G. Floweree, after a short career running a gambling den, was buying cattle from his home state, Oregon and Texas. By the 1870s Floweree was located on the Sun River along with Conrad Kohrs and Granville Stuart. In the earliest years for Montana stock raising the markets for cattle were almost exclusively local. The markets were often mining camps, military garrisons or other places where there were enough people in need of protein. Prior to the arrival of the railroad the Baker and Power firms were instrumental in growing the beef industry locally. When cattlemen wanted to move their animals east or south, long drives to far-off railheads in Utah or Wyoming were a necessity. However, long drives were risky due to raids by Indigenous people. Through various actions, both political and military, the Indigenous population was confined to reservations allowing ranchers access to the grass.⁴⁶ The lower quality land north of the Marias and the Missouri rivers and south of the Yellowstone River was set aside for the Indigenous population. Ranchers, like Conrad Kohrs and Granville Stuart, moved their herds into the excellent pastures along the Sun, Marias, and Smith rivers. The 1860s and 1870s were the beginning of a major transition for ranching in Montana. A geographic shift had taken place where herds that once grazed in the far south of the Territory were being brought north as the Indigenous population was being forced to retreat.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Spence, *Montana*, 53-73.

⁴⁷ Spence, *Montana*, 53-73; Spence, *Territorial Politics*, 57-116.

Conrad Kohrs Starts His Ranch

Conrad Kohrs, who would become the “Cattle King of Montana”, did not move to the Territory with the intention to ranch. Like so many others he came believing in the booster promise of easy wealth through mining. However, he quickly came to the conclusion that more money could be had from selling meat to miners than pulling gold out of the gulches. In his journal Kohrs recorded his first impression of the Deer Lodge Valley writing “The valley was full of antelope and many herds of fat cattle belonging to the mountaineers who lived there.”⁴⁸ Considering the thriving wildlife, along with the ample supply of booster literature at the time, Kohrs change in vocation made sense.

In 1862 Kohrs had a chance meeting in Bannack, Montana when the sheriff Hank Crawford hired him as his meat cutter and to manage the books for his meat-selling business. Crawford was impressed with Kohrs and soon made him a partner. However, within the year Crawford fled the city after running into some difficulty with Henry Plummer, a noted outlaw. The difficulties were described by the *Montana Post* in 1865 as a series of “...openly planned and persistent outrages...”⁴⁹ Crawford, concerned for his life, fled Bannack and left his meat cutting and selling business to Kohrs.

In 1864 Kohrs and Ben Peel formed a new business, Con and Peel. They were located on the main street of Virginia City where they sold steaks to miners, made candles from tallow, and ground the scraps into sausages. They gave the hides to miners to cover their dirt floors in a gesture of good will. The strike at Last Chance Gulch, according to the February 25 edition of the *Montana Post*, quelled “Whatever doubt may have lingered...concerning the future of

⁴⁸ Conrad Kohrs, *Conrad Kohrs: An Autobiography* (Deer Lodge: Platten Press, 1977), 19.

⁴⁹ *The Montana Post*, September 16, 1865. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

Montana...”⁵⁰ The strike was a driving force for both boosters and emigrants. For Kohrs, it was an opportunity to expand his meat business. In 1864 he acquired 400 work cattle to supply butcher shops run by his brothers and started wintering cattle at Deer Lodge.⁵¹ In the spring of 1865 cattle were becoming scarce due to the increase in population. Kohrs borrowed \$12,000 in cash in order to purchase \$85,000 worth of cattle. In his own words “In the spring of 65 I had all the beef in the country in my hands.”⁵² The significance of the early days Kohrs spent aggressively growing his business became more apparent as he reacted to environmental and market fluctuation during the 1880s. By owning his own beef business before becoming a rancher, Kohrs understood that having control over the source of beef in Montana was crucial to long term viability. In the years following 1886/1887 Kohrs was one of the few Montana ranchers to maintain full control over his cattle operation. By doing so he was able to adapt his operation in ways that were unavailable to ranchers who were beholden to stock commissioners in Chicago.

The following year Kohrs aggressively grew his business properties, ranching acreage, and cattle numbers. The first purchase was the Johnny Grant ranch located near Deer Lodge City which he bought on August 23 “...lock, stock, and barrel.” Kohrs received the land and the cattle. His purchase price was \$19,200.”⁵³ The next acquisition was the 160 acre Demers Ranch which, after the deed was signed, meant that Kohrs owned almost all of the cattle in the Deer

⁵⁰ *The Montana Post*. February 25, 1865. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁵¹ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 38.

⁵² Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 38.

⁵³ Larry Gill, “From Butcher Boy to Beef King: The Gold Camp Days of Conrad Kohrs,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 8, no. 2 (1958): 53.

Lodge Valley. He also owned mining properties and was on the cusp of entering the business of selling water to miners and farmers through a series of ditches and storage facilities.⁵⁴

From the beginning Kohrs' meat business was diverse as it included the raising, butchering and selling of beef. However, an additional revenue stream for Kohrs was water. In 1867 Kohrs had secured water rights on the west side of Deer Lodge. He and several partners formed the Rock Creek Ditch Company.⁵⁵ During the 1860s mining in Montana had evolved to include hydraulics. Simply put, a jet of water was blasted at a hillside washing all the alluvial soil away exposing the minerals. The company began by digging a ditch to transport water to Lake Pioneer where miners needed it. The cost was significant at \$165,000. Within months of completing the ditch the population of Lake Pioneer swelled to nearly 1,000 people and the ditch paid for itself in about two years. By 1870 Conrad Kohrs, unlike almost every other cattle rancher in the west, had diversified his business to the extent that should one business decline the others would provide overall stability. Even before Kohrs had become the "Cattle King of Montana" he had diversified and created the economic equivalent of, what historian Brian Donahue called, "an ecological safety net."⁵⁶

Conrad Kohrs' brother drove roughly 1,000 head of cattle north from Texas in 1871. This cattle drive was significant for how Kohrs would raise large numbers of animals in Montana. Most of Kohrs' stock was raised on the public domain and moving a large herd to a pasture was an effective method of making a claim. In later years, Kohrs would increase his herds exponentially and take advantage of free public land. When either the environment, or the

⁵⁴ Gill, "From Butcher Boy", 53.

⁵⁵ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 46.

⁵⁶ Brian Donahue, *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

market, or both were poor Kohrs acquired land, cattle, and ranching equipment at a depressed price from the operations that were not as well balanced as his.

The DHS Ranch Opens

In the spring of 1879 A.J. Davis, Samuel T. Hauser, and Granville Stuart joined the cattle boom in Montana. Collectively they were able to raise \$150,000. Stuart borrowed his share from Hauser's bank and Hauser borrowed his share from Davis' brother.⁵⁷ In 1880 all three principal investors of the DHS Ranch were named to the board of directors of the First National Bank of Helena.⁵⁸ Granville Stuart was the least financially capable member of the group. However, his long years in Montana and experience with the environment made him the obvious choice for superintendent and general manager of the ranch. By April of the following year Stuart had purchased 9,400 head of cattle at the cost of \$141,327.50 but the DHS was still without a home range.⁵⁹

The first possible location for a home range was the Teton area near present day Great Falls. The area had numerous advantages; however, Stuart objected for reasons that remain unclear. Their second thought was to scout out the Yellowstone area because, according to the *Bozeman Avant Courier*, "cattle are all reported to be in excellent condition"⁶⁰ as of 1878. However, that range would have taken them into Wyoming and thereby beyond their sphere of political and economic influence. The desire of the DHS Ranch to remain within the area where they had influence proved significant as they sought ways to grow their operation, increase the

⁵⁷ D. MacMillan, "The Gilded Age and Montana's DHS Ranch", *Montana Magazine of Western History* 20, no. 2 (1970): 53.

⁵⁸ *Helena Weekly Herald*, April 1, 1880. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁵⁹ Ledger, DHS Ranch, MC61 Volume 1, Granville Stuart Papers, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁶⁰ *Bozeman Avant Courier*, June 20, 1878, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

influence of cattle ranching in Montana politics and improve their range after several severe winters.

The location of the ranch was still a pressing question in 1880 when Stuart saw an opportunity to use the ranch's political connections, namely Hauser, to secure both land and movement of cattle. Stuart wrote a letter to Martin Maginnis, his Territorial Delegate. A Territorial Delegate was a non-voting but elected position in Congress that represented a Territory, like Montana, during the 1880s. While Maginnis could not vote he was able to exert some influence on policy which suggests a significant political connection for Granville Stuart's ranching interests. Stuart wrote "...we want your influence directed towards securing two other things to wit: First. The right of way to drive cattle, horses, or trains of wagons across the [Crow] reservation and secondly take a slice of the eastern end of the reservation consisting of all that portion...east of the Big Horn River."⁶¹ To Stuart's mind the location of his home range and the right to drive cattle across the Crow reservation were now settled and he headed east from Helena. However, when the time came to actually leasing the land from the Crow the agent would not even bring it up for fear they would refuse to cede the upper end of their Reservation. As a consequence, Stuart was forced to return to the Flat Willow country near the Musselshell River where he came upon a "stream of cold clear water...a magnificent body of hay with cold springs all through it...The whole country clear to the Yellowstone is good grass country."⁶² The range itself consisted of 800 acres which was secured with squatter's rights. The size of the range at 800 acres was not sufficient for the 9,000 DHS cattle. Stuart's likely intention was to use his

⁶¹ Letter, Granville Stuart to Martin McGinnis, April 5, 1880, MC61 Box 1 3-4, Granville Stuart Papers 1863-1919, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁶² Granville Stuart, *Forty Years on the Frontier* (Cleveland: Arthur Clark, 1925), 102.

cattle to gain control over adjacent property using “the law of customary range.” By doing so he, like Kohrs, could access ample public land for free.

By June the DHS cattle were being driven to their range and construction had begun in several strategic areas of the range. The reason this construction was strategic was it helped to establish the DHS’s range rights. The movement of DHS cattle was significant enough that the *Rocky Mountain Husbandman* noted “Granville Stuart passed this week for his ranch near Fort Maginnis. A portion of his herds have already arrived on the range and the remainder are enroute [sic]. Three herds, numbering in all over 5,000 head passed Martinsdale this week. These herds were gathered in the Beaverhead valley.”⁶³ The number of cattle reported far exceed the 9,000 that the DHS actually owned. The exaggeration was likely a product of boosterism as there was no report of Stuart acquiring several thousand additional stock.

The booster representations available made it seem as though the heavy lifting for running a ranch was completed when the lands had been secured. For example, in *The Resources of Montana Territory and Attractions of Yellowstone National Park* Robert A. Strahorn wrote “As a grazing region Montana has no superior, and I doubt if an equal. Her 38,000,000 acres of grazing land are covered with nutritious bunch, buffalo and other grasses, whose fattening and bone and muscle-producing qualities offer a theme for endless surprise.”⁶⁴ In his section on *Cattle Growing* he wrote “In the “old west” and eastern states the stock grower is always obliged to work hard for six months of the year to raise food to keep his cattle through the severe wet winters, while here cattle are especially self-reliant, and if left to take care of themselves, winter and summer, will grow while their owner sleeps, and come off the range, even in the spring, in

⁶³ *Rocky Mountain Husbandman*, June, 1880. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁶⁴ Robert A. Strahorn, *The Resources of Montana Territory and Attractions of Yellowstone National Park* (Helena: Montana, 1879), 22.

good condition for market.” He then went on to note that “The expense for caring for cattle in Montana, in herds of 1,000 or more, is about sixty cents per head per annum...The same animal in Illinois, be he scrub or thoroughbred, would cost his owner two-thirds of his selling price for feed alone.”⁶⁵ Strahorn’s assessment of the Montana cattle industry was an excellent example of 19th century boosterism that emphasized easy work leading to large profits. The problem was his description of wintering cattle was an endorsement of the Texas ranching system that was entirely inappropriate for Montana’s climate.

For Granville Stuart, Conrad Kohrs, Matthew Cochrane, Duncan McEachran and Alfred Cross the ranching business would have seemed a fool-proof enterprise that was a sure thing. The reason was the booster material extolling the virtues of the climate, water, grasslands, and the industry. The booster material for cattle ranching was, however, inaccurate. Compounding the problem of environmental inaccuracy was the endorsement of ranching methods that were not suitable for either the Alberta or Montana climate. The result of the inaccurate information was that all five ranches would, to varying degrees, import a flawed ranching system to the detriment of their operation. Ultimately, all five ranches were forced to adapt to a climate that was far different than the one described by boosters. The following chapter will examine how each of these ranches tackled the problems of a fundamental misunderstanding of the environment in a different way.

⁶⁵Strahorn, *The Resources of Montana Territory*, 25.

Chapter 5: Cattle King(s) and Booster Grasslands in Montana

In 1867, Conrad Kohrs owned one of the largest cattle herds in Montana and, along with his partner John Bielenberg, began branding his cattle with “CK”. The 1860s in Montana were relatively good to Kohrs. There were several consecutive mild winters, and he, along with Granville Stuart, were elected as Commissioners of Deer Lodge County¹. On the surface it would seem as though his path to “Cattle King” of Montana was established. However, business prospects were not as favorable as they seemed and these struggles influenced Kohrs to establish a ranching model that was diverse, focused on improvement, flexible, well capitalized and politically motivated. As a result, his business would come out of the disastrous winter of 1886 stable where many others lost millions. During the same period Granville Stuart, along with Samuel Hauser and Andrew and Erwin Davis, also entered the cattle business. While their ranch, the DHS, was successful it would not reach its true potential until it was absorbed under the “CK” brand. Stuart, as general manager, would be instrumental in shaping the ranching practices that would help make both brands viable after the winter of 1886/87. This chapter will look at how these ranches were set up parallel to each other using similar methods that allowed for adaptation to an environment that was not as amiable as booster literature had led investors to believe.

¹ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 54.

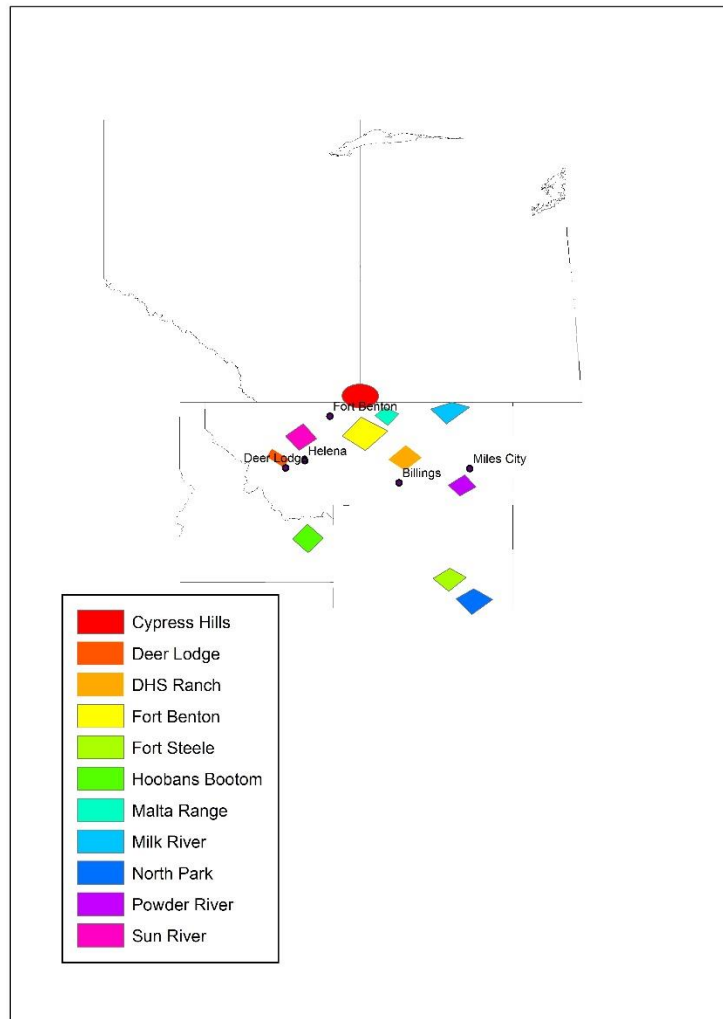


Figure 3: Control over public land was vital for Conrad Kohrs. It is hardly surprising that he would work within the Montana cattle industry and government to protect his "free grass."

In 1866, during the second session of the Montana legislature, a law was passed which stipulated that winter grazing of cattle could not be done without title over the pasture.² The law was repealed the following year but it was enough to justify a growing concern over access to public lands. For cattle ranchers in Montana access to public land was the backbone of their

² Osgood, *Day of the Cattleman*, 187.

ranching methods. A law that required title over winter pasture would dramatically increase costs and hamstring the industry. The legislation requiring title was likely responsible for pushing both Kohrs and Stuart into politics. In his autobiography Kohrs noted that “During these years (1865-1869) the affairs of the county had been run...so poorly that the citizens decided to put up an independent ticket...In 1869 Granville Stuart and I were elected...”³ It should be noted that, despite what his *Autobiography* states, the Montana Legislature was not poorly run. From Kohrs’ perspective though, any legislation that would increase his costs, cut off his access to public land and make open range cattle ranching more difficult was certainly *poor* government. Despite Kohrs’ wealth, influence and uncanny ability to know good government from bad, Stuart was far more politically active. Their political activism reflected their industry as they championed, or wrote, legislation that directly benefitted stock raising in Montana. For example, evolving legislation starting in 1868 encouraged the importation of breeding stock, recording of brands, and how to handle strays.⁴ It is certain that for Kohrs laws that benefitted his industry were examples of a well-run legislature.

In the fall of 1869 Kohrs moved roughly a thousand head of, mostly, breeding cattle from Deer Lodge to the Sun River area in Montana. According to Kohrs’ friend and foreman Tom Hooban, the herd had grown too large to winter in the Deer Lodge Valley without hay set aside for supplemental feeding.⁵ There was adequate land at Deer Lodge to grow winter feed for cattle, yet at this time Kohrs did not do so. The likely reason was that he was still confident that he could get all his cattle through the winter using public land. It also seems probable that he did not want to incur the expense of growing and harvesting hay for cattle feed when all information

³ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 53.

⁴ Act of December 30, 1868, Session 5; Act of December 30, 1871, *Montana Legislature*, Session 7.

⁵ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 52.

available indicated that it was not necessary. Oddly enough, Kohrs was willing to risk “Indian raids” by grazing his cattle in the open country but not harvesting hay for feeding. Not setting aside winter feed for his cattle yet risking them in the open country indicate that, at the time, Kohrs was invested in the Texas system.

The move to Sun River was a further example of how Kohrs utilized public land to fatten his cattle for markets inside and outside of the Territory. The move onto public lands, and the faith that he would not face any restrictive legislation, was reflective of emerging Montana politics. The previous governor, James T. Ashley, had just been removed from office amid a series of political issues. He was replaced with a Republican from Ohio, Benjamin Franklin Potts, who was a believer in Montana’s cattle industry. At a territorial fair Potts commented that “The cattle show I think surpassed our Ohio cattle shows, this appears almost incredible but is true.”⁶ Potts may have been playing at politics here; as incoming governor he was aware that cattle raisers were a political force and he may not have wanted to ruffle any feathers. He also would have been aware that the total value for stock in 1870 was nearly two million dollars and was a vital industry.⁷ For ranchers, having a Republican booster in their corner must have been reassuring after nearly having their winter range rights taken away in 1867.

In 1870, according to Kohrs, the cattle business in Montana was not necessarily in his favor. In his autobiography he wrote that “Business prospects were not as favorable as they had been. Many cattle had been driven in from Texas as competition had become strong.”⁸ In this sense it is likely that Kohrs was not talking about the monetary aspects of cattle ranching but expressing his anxiety over losing access to public land. The number of cattle in Montana had

⁶ Spence, *Territorial Politics*, 76.

⁷ Spence, *Territorial Politics*, 76.

⁸ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 53.

increased significantly but Texas cattle did not arrive in large numbers for another decade. For example, Kohrs noted that Dan Floweree had begun to graze his Texas herd on Sun River near the military reservation and Sam Hall and Warren Martin had placed their large herd on grass near the Missouri River. These, however, were not Texas cattle. Nevertheless, more and more cattle were being grazed in Montana making finding, and then controlling, unused pasture a concern. The census data during the 1870s underlines this significant increase in cattle and therefore decrease in pasture. The 1870 Montana census recorded 36,738 cattle and that number had increased to 140,000 by 1876.⁹ The only monetary concern Kohrs could have had was that by 1870 placer mining had significantly decreased. The lower gold yield drove miners, the most important market for Montana ranchers, to other parts of the country where mining was still profitable.

While this scenario looked complicated for Kohrs, he was able to turn it to his advantage and increase his herd, a trait that would define his ability to adapt to both a changing marketplace and environment. In the fall of 1870 another rancher, H. Frederickson, was forced to sell off his land and herd. According to Kohrs the land was located at Modesty Creek and “I purchased the cattle, several hundred head of young cattle at \$65.00 per head, and several fine mares, paying as high as \$150.00 per head and also bought another herd near Point of Rock on the Beaver Head.”¹⁰ The cost of cattle at \$65.00 a head was high in comparison to other years. Yet, Kohrs must have felt he could make a profit on the cattle. Furthermore, the purchase of the Frederickson herd underlined Kohrs’ concern about access to public land. Even if the Kohrs lost some money on the cattle the increase in land would be beneficial to his operation in the long

⁹ Government of Montana Agricultural Bureau, *Montana Agricultural Census 1870 and 1876*, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

¹⁰ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 53.

run. The new acquisitions were sent to his brother who took them to Deer Lodge to join up with his existing herd. Later that fall the herd was cut in two and the animals that they did not want to feed over the winter were driven to Sun River to graze on free grass.¹¹

As Kohrs expanded his stock and influence in Montana it is important to note that before the 1880s most of the cattle grazing in Montana were not Texas longhorns. The majority of the cattle were from Utah, where cattle ranching had diffused north from Mormon settlements. Another source for cattle was the Pacific Northwest where ranching had become vital for economics and food security during the 1840s. The common term for Utah and Pacific Northwest animals was “domestics” and they were somewhat more cold tolerant than their southern counterparts. However, they were also hard muscled and so crossing them with stock from the east, Durham or shorthorn for example, was important to selling their meat.¹² The cross-breeding of eastern stock with winter hardy stock was important to adapting ranching to the northern Great Plains and would be a common practice in both Montana and Canada. In the years following 1886/1887 Kohrs became one of the most celebrated cattle breeders in Montana.

In 1871, Kohrs was in Denver where he formed a company to buy cattle in Texas and trail them to Montana. The formation of this company further emphasized that in the 1870s his concern was access to public land and not Texas cattle. In 1872 Kohrs was in Davenport, Iowa and while there he purchased his first herd of shorthorns to breed with his “domestic” animals. This purchase took advantage of the 1871 legislation encouraging the importation of breeding, or blooded, stock. The herd was driven to Corrinne, Oklahoma and put into the hands of Tom Hooban who had recently left Sun River in order to manage the new herd. On a return trip

¹¹ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 53.

¹² Lee I. Neidringhaus, “The N Bar N Ranch: A Legend of the Open-Range Cattle Industry 1885-99” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 60, no. 1 (2010): 7.

Hooban "...bought animals and machinery, such as mowing machines, rakes and wagons for the purpose of fitting up the ranch he had located on the west side of the Snake River below the mouth of Portnip River, and some distance above American Falls."¹³ The area itself became known as Hooban's Bottom and was, according to Kohrs' autobiography, "a great place for hay."¹⁴ The acquisition of both shorthorns and hay lands indicates that Kohrs was developing his sense of the environmental limitations of the Montana environment. His domestic stock were able to survive cold weather but eastern stock, coming from a warmer climate, were less well adapted. By having hay lands Kohrs was hedging his bets against putting new, less cold tolerant stock to fend for themselves on public land. While feeding cattle during the winter seems like a self-evident process the prevailing booster "wisdom" of the time suggested that it was unnecessary. For example, an 1869 issue of *The New North-West*, published in Kohrs' home county Deer Lodge, reported "There are, as records show, no such extremes of temperature as are common in the New England and Middle States. When farmers are satisfied that instead of feeding cattle for six months on stores which it has cost the labor of the other six months to procure, they can use, in ordinary seasons, the bounteous provision which the God of Nature has made ready for use without labor..."¹⁵ This assertion dovetails well with the general perception of Montana climate. In an article from an 1869 edition of the *Montana Post* the climate was described as "...not anywhere in the United States as equal extent of surface to the settled portion of Montana, where there has been so mild, unchangeable and healthy weather this winter. Sunshine by day and glittering stars by night have become monotonous, and we hear of the snows and chilly blasts of the central states with a sympathetic shudder for the unfortunates of

¹³ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 58.

¹⁴ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 58.

¹⁵ *The new North-west*, October 1, 1869. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

that hyperborean climate.”¹⁶ This small change in Kohrs’ ranching methods indicates that he was starting to shy away from the Texas system, at least with his eastern and other valuable stock.

Kohrs was prepared to invest in both hay land and machinery. His desire to make these purchases was likely due to experience gained as a resident of Montana, which made him less reliant on the often inaccurate environmental descriptions published in local newspapers. How boosters represented the environment did not replace the wisdom gained through almost a decade of experience. For example, the *Avant Courier* noted that “The weather this past week has indicated an early winter...The valley is covered with snow, and snow has been falling more or less on the mountains every day of the week...The best ranges are already covered...”¹⁷ When Kohrs was discussing this early winter he noted that “On account of the lateness of the season the cattle had little show to improve and even with all the hay we had provided we sustained a loss because the winter brought a lot of snow.”¹⁸ While the 1871 winter was not disastrous to Kohrs or the industry generally it was a deviation from booster representations. Experience with the environment is something that separated Kohrs (and Stuart of the DHS Ranch) from many of their contemporaries who arrived during the 1880s during the cattle boom.

In the spring of 1873, Territorial politics were, again, playing an important role for Kohrs. As a consequence, he spent a great deal of time at the legislature in Virginia City. The question at hand was whether or not to subsidize the extension of the “Road” (narrow-gauge rail) from Utah into Montana at a cost of one million dollars and a charter of free taxation for a period

¹⁶ *The Montana Post*, February 12, 1869. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

¹⁷ *Avant Courier*, November 16, 1871. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

¹⁸ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 58.

of 10 years.¹⁹ The measure was voted down, likely because of the east/west division within the Territory. Politicians from the eastern side of the territory tended to back mining concerns. As this railway would not have benefitted mining it was not worth the expense.²⁰ The blocking of a rail system into Montana was a significant blow to ranchers who were anxious for access to markets outside Montana. Historian Earnest Staples Osgood noted that the small boom in Montana cattle to feed miners was playing out as those same miners left for more promising strikes. With no easily accessible railroad cattle had to be shipped by a lengthy drive to Cheyenne, Wyoming. From there cattle cars could connect with the Union Pacific main line, completed in 1869.²¹

The presence of the Union Pacific made Cheyenne a practical solution for Montana ranchers, although it was an expensive and difficult cattle drive. Nevertheless in 1873, lacking other options, Kohrs drove his herd south but “Feeling that the drive from Montana to Cheyenne was a long one to make without resting the cattle, we determined to drive...as far as Snake River and winter them there.”²² The concern for the cattle in his *Autobiography* while on this drive was admirable. However, it should be noted that Kohrs did not relinquish control over the pasture along the Snake River. He must have left a nominal herd there in order to maintain his customary control over another area of public land. In the spring of 1874 some cattle that had been purchased for \$10.00 a head joined the drive increasing the herd to 2,300. Tom Hooban then “took them up to Bitter Root, across the range to the Big Hole, then over to Horse Prairie and on to Cheyenne...”an additional 2,000 head were shipped from Sun River following much the same

¹⁹ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 61.

²⁰ Spence, *Territorial Politics*, 77.

²¹ Osgood, *Day of the Cattleman*, 54.

²² Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 59.

route.²³ This drive was the longest, largest, and first to a railhead. The level of organization required for the drive established Kohrs' operation as one that would be able to dominate the Montana market. Furthermore, by leaving cattle in various places he was setting up a network for shipping his cattle as safely as possible. Kohrs' cattle outfit would use this route, with some variations, until the railroad made its way into eastern Montana in the 1880s.

While this drive was a small event with respect to cattle ranching in Montana it was still significant. The lack of local railheads forced Montana ranchers to drive their cattle across country. Kohrs took the opportunity to use a cattle drive to also acquire additional public land and move his stock to market. Environmentally, the additional pastures helped him spread his cattle over a large portion of Montana. During the 1870s a widespread weather event that could kill cattle generally was something that ranchers did not think could happen. However, local events like floods or cold snaps, could lead to a loss of stock and capital. By spreading his herds around, Kohrs was making the likelihood of catastrophic loss less likely.

In 1874, Kohrs' first big shipment of cattle arrived in Chicago. Within several years his cattle shipments would increase into the tens of thousands. Kohrs' success necessitated hiring a commission agent in Chicago to manage both money and herds at the Chicago stockyards. Joseph Rosenbaum's firm provided accounting services, as well as buying and selling cattle, allowing Kohrs time to run his ranching operation. Rosenbaum's market knowledge facilitated the sale of cattle on a national scale. The national market was important because due, to the waning mining industry, the Montana market had decreased and the intransigence of Montana politics decreased the likelihood that a railway would soon be built. Perhaps most significantly,

²³ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 63.

with the hiring of Rosenbaum's firm, Kohrs had financial support and market recognition before the large cattle boom in the 1880s and after the disastrous winter of 1886/1887.

At the same time Kohrs was acquiring cattle and the services of Rosenbaum, he was also gaining access to more of the best grazing lands in the west beyond Montana and Wyoming. In 1877 Kohrs wrote that "In the spring of the year the herd of 1000 head gathered on the North Platte was driven to South Park, in the western part of Colorado, quite a park with an abundance of grass, and there were no cattle in it but ours."²⁴ Kohrs' assertion that there were no other cattle there but his seems unlikely considering the cattle industry in Colorado at the time. What is more likely was that Kohrs used his 1,000 cattle to claim the use of the pasture and then pushed other cattlemen out. Nevertheless, the Colorado cattle were fattened at a low cost and then in the fall "were driven to Laramie City. We were unable to get cars so we drove them to Pine Bluffs, where there was plenty of feed and water...I sold them to Alec Swan at \$48.00 a head."²⁵ Considering that keeping the cattle in Colorado had only cost a total of \$4,000 Kohrs made a tidy profit on the sale. Expanding his control over public land was becoming an important business tactic for Kohrs. His home ranch at Deer Lodge remained small yet well supplied with fences, feed and barns while his ever increasing herds grazed on public land. It was not until the 1880s that public land was starting to be occupied by homesteaders and railways that large land purchases became necessary. Grazing cattle on public land was an important strategy for Kohrs and one that he was uniquely situated to exploit. As an early entrant into the cattle industry, he was able to secure the "law of customary range" for his herds by occupying good grassland. The presence of his cattle was often enough to keep other rancher's cattle away. This quasi-legal

²⁴ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 68.

²⁵ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 68.

arrangement among ranchers allowed Kohrs to diversify and build capital. When owning land became a necessity he was able to purchase what was required.

Even with the additional cost of hard winters and distant rail connections, raising cattle for a profit was established by the late 1870s. The booster literature that had lured ranchers west appeared to be accurate furthering its appeal. In an 1877 edition of the *Helena Weekly Herald* a Chicago stock dealer was quoted “I am fully persuaded that Montana is the cattle country of America”²⁶ In 1880 the most famous booster report for the American cattle industry was published by James S. Brisbin titled *The Beef Bonanza: Or How to Get Rich on the Plains*. Brisbin, like many others, predicted staggering profits and easy working conditions for western cattlemen generally. For Montana’s grazing potential he wrote that the grasses “...cure naturally on the ground” and “as a stock growing region Montana surpassed all other sections of the Great West.”²⁷ For Kohrs, the booster material especially rang true. He had expanded his herds in both size and locations all over Montana, Wyoming and Colorado and had not severely suffered from inclement weather, quite the opposite. He and Hooban had bought hay lands and mowing machines but there is no evidence they had used them outside of Deer Lodge and Hooban’s Bottom, where the most valuable stock was kept. The majority of the 1870s was a temporary equilibrium for Kohrs. He had done nothing but follow booster representations of the environment and had not suffered for it. However, the winter of 1881 was the first indication that stock raising in Montana was at the mercy of the weather.

²⁶ *Helena weekly herald*, March 29, 1877. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

²⁷ Brisbin, *Beef Bonanza*, 167.

Rapid Growth and the Establishment of a Multi-Faceted Ranching Practice

In early 1880s most ranchers in Montana established a single ranching system where younger cattle were grazed year round with very little feeding or control until they had gained enough weight to be sent to market. Essentially, most Montana ranchers adopted the Texas system.” In *North American Cattle Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion, and Differentiation* geographer Terry Jordan wrote that the Texas ranching system evolved in the American south, likely in the Carolinas and southeastern Texas, and made its way north. The system was characterized by allowing cattle to, more or less, care for themselves year-round and collect them when it was time for sale or slaughter. The strong Hispanic influence can be identified through some of the terminology, “lariat” for example.²⁸ This method of ranching was popular because it required very little in the way of investment in infrastructure or labor and, importantly, it was successful on the southern plains. Although, it should be noted that its success was dependent on an amiable climate and healthy animals. For Montana, the Texas system had the added attraction of being particularly well suited to ranching on public land. It is hardly surprising that Kohrs adopted the Texas ranching system as one of his two ranching methods. However, his home ranch in Deer Lodge was located in an intermountain valley. At Deer Lodge he was forced by natural limitations and frequent harsh winters to irrigate and cultivate native grasses, fence his crops, and supply ample winter feed for the few cattle kept there. It was the experience in both styles of ranching that allowed for Kohrs to adapt to the environment and markets after the crash of 1886/1887.

²⁸ Terry Jordan, *North American Cattle Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion, and Differentiation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993). Chapter 7 “The Anglo-Texan Ranching System”.

While not yet the “Cattle King of Montana” by 1881 Conrad Kohrs was one of the largest stock raisers in the Territory. He controlled land at Sun River in western Montana, Snake River in Idaho, and Goose Creek in Wyoming. To this he added another grazing pasture at Flat Willow Creek, central Montana. The plan was for Kohrs and Bielenberg to move Oregon “domestic” stock to this area and breed them with shorthorns and Herefords.²⁹ As noted before, domestics were better cold tolerant and keeping them on the open range over the winter was common practice. Shorthorns and Herefords, however, were far less hardy but were better beef stock.³⁰ By breeding domestics with shorthorns or Herefords the goal was to have an animal that was cold tolerant and a good beef cow. The breeding plan had both business and environmental connotations, Kohrs wanted the best of both.

It is important to note that Kohrs was not the only rancher moving into central Montana. The increase in ranchers made operating methods and business sense all the more crucial. Robert Fletcher notes that

During the early eighties, central Montana, north of the Yellowstone and south of the Missouri, was filling with the cattle of Montana owners. The Judith Cattle Company...was the first in the Judith Basin...He was followed by James Fergus and his son, who located on Armell’s Creek...Robert Coburn and Henry Sieben both had cattle on Flatwillow; John Dovenspeck picked Elk Creek, and John T. Murphy, of the Montana Cattle Company...a famous horse ranch on the headwaters of Donald Creek...³¹

It was not just cattle putting pressure on public land. Despite cattle ranching received the bulk of the attention from boosters raising sheep attracted similar representations for both a healthy environment and economic potential. In 1882 *The Helena Weekly Herald* wrote, “The broken, rugged buttes, and wide table lands, richly clad in bunch grass would seem to adapt the region to

²⁹Fletcher, *Free Grass to Fences*, 49.

³⁰ Joan E. Grundy, "The Hereford Bull: His Contribution to New World and Domestic Beef Supplies." *The Agricultural History Review* 50, no. 1 (2002): 69-88.

³¹ Fletcher, *Free Grass to Fences*, 49.

sheep raising...³²” Taking advantage of the excellent sheep environment, Dave Hilger “jeopardized his popularity by trailing sheep from near Helena, to winter them on Salt Creek in the Judith Basin.”³³ Cattlemen were concerned about sheep raising because sheep were direct competition as both animals were grazed on public land. Furthermore, sheep were thought to be deleterious to the grass, certainly more so than cattle.³⁴ The total number of grazers was becoming a concern about more than just access to public land. Ranchers like Granville Stuart started to be genuinely concerned about overstocking.

The winter of 1881 was, in comparison to the previous three winters, harsh and something of a cautionary tale. The first arrival of Texas cattle to Montana was in the fall of 1881 when an English cattle company drove 5,000 head into the Tongue River area of Custer County. The drive was long and when the cattle arrived they were weak. The winter that year was early and harsh and the Texas herd was completely wiped out.³⁵ When the event was reported by *The Benton Weekly Record* it wrote “The *Yellowstone Journal* says that Col. Groom’s³⁶ Texas cattle on Tongue River are dying fast while ‘the American or Montana cattle are in fine condition and thriving.’”³⁷ A similar story unfolded on the DHS as Stuart reported significant losses among his cattle that had not had the time to acclimate, while his Montana born stock suffered far less.³⁸ The discrepancy drawn between local and imported cattle was

³² *Helena Weekly Herald*, January 26, 1882. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

³³ Fletcher, *Free Grass to Fences*, 49.

³⁴ Michal P. Malone and Richard B. Roeder, “1876 in Field and Pasture,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 25, no. 2 (1975): 35.

³⁵ Fletcher, *Free Grass to Fences*, 53.

³⁶ Colonel Groom was likely from the Matador Land and Cattle Company from the Texas Panhandle. See: Matthew Todd, “Now May Be Heard a Discouraging Word: The Impact of Climate Fluctuation on Texas Ranching in the 1880s” (MA Thesis, University of Saskatchewan Saskatoon, 2009).

³⁷ *The Benton Weekly Record*, January 7, 1881. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

³⁸ Stuart to Hauser, February 5 and February 21, 1881, MC37, Box 20-20, Samuel Thomas Hauser Papers, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

important for Montana stock raisers. Despite the winter deaths of 5,000 cattle, Kohrs moved his Montana born cattle to that exact location. He was clearly confident that his Montana cattle would not meet the same fate as the Texas stock.

The decision to move herds to Tongue River coincided with a good spring and summer and Kohrs' cattle flourished. In his *Autobiography* he wrote "...I went to Tongue River and got that herd ready for market driving to Miles City to load them. There were over 1100 head in this drive. 400 four year old steers and 700 three-year-olds. They had been on a new range, had gotten very fat and brought big prices in Chicago."³⁹ The juxtaposition between Texas cattle dying and Montana cattle flourishing must have reinforced the idea that local stock was superior in inclement weather. If anything, it would have made Kohrs, and other ranchers, less cautious about putting their local stock on public land for the winter. Kohrs was paid \$93,500.00 for the Tongue River herd and very likely learned nothing about the Montana environment.⁴⁰

The success from the 1882 sale had two different results. First, it would spur another round of growth in both land and cattle. Second, as an additional temporary equilibrium, it reinforced booster representations of the Montana grasslands, ranching on public lands, the durability of Montana cattle and the Texas system generally. The early 1880s in Montana were good to the cattle industry which had an additional unfortunate side effect. Despite the deaths of 5,000 Texas cattle, thousands of cattle were being driven into Montana to take advantage of what appeared to be an unlimited ranching territory. The additional stock would put pressure on public land, not just access to it but its quality and grass cover.

³⁹ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 75.

⁴⁰ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 75.

In 1882 Kohrs was, thanks to his success, well situated to take advantage of the borderlands regional market first exploited by Power and Baker. The Canadian Pacific Railway was coming west which meant there would be work crews, about 500 Northwest Mounted Police, and the Blood, Piegan, and other Indigenous peoples, were being fed to some degree, by the Canadian government. Kohrs was able to sell his Sun River herd which was "...the finest in the state..." to "Charlie Conrad and to I.G. Baker & Company" who had a contract to furnish beef for the Canadian Pacific. The sale was for 1500 cattle at \$62.50 a head for a total of \$94,000.⁴¹ This contract came only a year after the changes favoring ranchers were made to Canada's Dominion Land Act which further emphasized Matthew Cochrane's argument for the necessity of large ranches in Alberta.

In 1883 Conrad Kohrs purchased a large stake in Granville Stuart's DHS Ranch. The *Daily Enterprise*, published in Livingston, printed that "The heaviest transaction in cattle that has occurred in the territory took place this week, Mr. Conrad Kohrs...purchasing of Mr. A. J. Davis, the Davis, Hauser, & Co. herd of 12,000 cattle for \$400,000."⁴² The price Kohrs paid was, on average, \$33 dollars per head. The transaction established Kohrs at the head of the Montana cattle business as he had just doubled his herd and increased his access to public land. The increase in stock prompted *The New Northwest* to be the first to call him "...the undisputed cattle king of Montana"⁴³ who owned or controlled 25,000 head worth 1.5 million dollars.⁴⁴ The DHS cattle were grazing on the Fort Maginnis range under the management of Granville Stuart.

⁴¹ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 76.

⁴² *Daily Enterprise*, July 16, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>.

⁴³ *New Northwest*, July 13, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>.

⁴⁴ *New Northwest*, July 13, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>.

The following month Kohrs was improving Deer Lodge with barns and stables suggesting that he was still invested in running a multi-faceted operation, concerned with improvement and indicating his control over public land.⁴⁵ The idea of improvement at Deer Lodge would not stay confined to barns and fences. In 1884, he moved many of the purebred cattle to Deer Lodge. By doing so, he was able more rapidly improve the quality of his Montana stock. It all probability this was a business move, as there had not been any environmental events forcing Kohrs to abandon his prolific use of public land. The breeds specifically mentioned were shorthorns and Herefords. While shorthorns had been gaining in popularity as an improving breed Herefords were significantly less well known outside of Kansas and utilizing them moved Kohrs ahead of his contemporaries who were relying on other breeds.⁴⁶

By 1884, the open rangelands of Montana, especially in the east, were home to roughly 600,000 cattle along with horses and sheep. The increase was mostly due to the number of Texas cattle that had been trailed into Montana since the first disastrous foray in 1881. Texas cattle were not really a problem for overstocking yet; however, they did bring the possibility of disease. All of the prominent cattlemen of Montana, and likely the smaller producers as well, were deeply concerned. *The River Press*, published in Fort Benton, ran an alarming article informing people that “The importation at this late day of Texas cattle, in which malignant types of disease are fixed...is fraught with danger to the herds of Montana, compared to which all the elemental fury of the severest winter is but child’s play.”⁴⁷ Interestingly, the writer could not help but add a booster plug for the industry in “No form of disease is inherent in our native

⁴⁵ *New Northwest*, August 10, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>.

⁴⁶ See *The New Northwest*, February 15, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/> The article mentions that a Hereford purchased from Kohrs was the first to be imported to Madison County.

⁴⁷ *The River Press*, March 19, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

stock...their immunity from all taint and physical corruption is a certificate...that will enhance their value in the markets from year to year.”⁴⁸ The action taken by Kohrs (and Stuart) to combat this threat was to organize a meeting and designate a five-person committee, of which he was one, to watch the spread of diseased cattle.

It would be naïve not to infer that an additional “disease” brought by imported cattle was additional stress on the grasslands, losing control of free grass to their competition and problems with interbreeding inferior Texas stock with their blooded stock. The problem of losing control over free grass was related to the ad-hoc approach Montana cattlemen had taken to land rights. Without a legislated system in place it was possible to lose your pasture with the only recourse being the courts or vigilantism. The question of breeding was interrelated to land-use as well. Montana cattlemen were using the Texas system which meant that an inferior bull, likely from Texas, could wander into your herd and breed. The subsequent calf would be inferior stock and the question of ownership would be unclear. Noting that this was going to be an important political issue, and wanting to support Montana ranchers, the *River Press* wrote “...Texas fever grows out of the bad air and water of the southern plains. It is less known in Colorado near the mountains and with us it is almost wholly unknown...Mountain streams, pure, dry air, and never failing pasturage Insure Montana cattle against fever.”⁴⁹

The result of the increasing noise being made by ranchers regarding southern stock being pushed north was political action. Granville Stuart, not content with his committee, wrote to Kohrs “I think the Govr. [sic] ought to get permission from the President to call an extra session

⁴⁸ *The River Press*, March 19, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁴⁹ *The River Press*, August 13, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

of the Legislature, so we could protect ourselves.”⁵⁰ The purpose of the meeting was to strengthen the quarantine line created by Wyoming in 1884.⁵¹ In a letter from May, 1884 Stuart again wrote to Kohrs “I am glad you are stirring up the stock men. Keep your lick up, for we must have some legislation so we can protect ourselves. As it now stands we are liable to have some disease imported onto our ranges that would ruin us all.”⁵² While both men were unable to gain a special session of the Legislature the “stirring up” of the stock raisers by Kohrs led to cattlemen dominating Montana’s fourteenth assembly in 1885. On the surface the anxiety about disease was well founded. Texas cattle did, indeed, carry diseases that were not common in Montana. Therefore, keeping them out was logical. However, when your business depends on free grass perhaps there were other reasons as well.

In April 1884, Kohrs attended the Wyoming Stock Growers Convention in Cheyenne. The Wyoming Stock Growers Association Meeting was the largest meeting of its kind ever held in the Territory. The Association represented 2,000,000 head of stock and \$10,000,000 of invested capital. The local paper wrote that

Mr. Kohrs realizes the necessity of some further legislation in relation to cattle interests in Montana and visits Cheyenne to learn the working laws of Wyoming and neighboring Territories and States, with a view to ascertaining their merits and having brought up in the Montana legislature next winter a bill that will be equitable and adequate to the stock interests in this territory.⁵³

Unsurprisingly, some of the Wyoming resolutions were designed to keep out Texas cattle.

However, the only resolution from Wyoming passed by Montana stockmen was to press

⁵⁰ Letter, Granville Stuart to Conrad Kohrs, March 24, 1884, MC61 Box 1-1, Granville Stuart Papers 1863-1919, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁵¹ *Helena Weekly Herald*, August 7, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁵² Letter, Granville Stuart to Conrad Kohrs, May 2, 1884, MC61 Box 1-3, Granville Stuart Papers 1863-1919, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁵³ *The New Northwest*, April 11, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

Congress to pass any legislation protecting their industry. Kohrs, being a leader in his industry, was appointed to a committee to “draft a memorial to be presented to the various round-up association and stock owners of Montana, for the necessities and importance of holding a convention of stock owners to secure the necessary legislation for the protection of the stock interests of this Territory at the coming session of the Territorial legislature.”⁵⁴ In August, Kohrs was named Deer Lodge and Meagher County representative and to the executive of the newly revived Montana Stock Growers Association.⁵⁵ It is probable that the goal of Montana stockmen was to protect their access to public land and by acting together they could exert additional political pressure to do so. Montana cattle ranchers at the time liked to think of themselves as rugged individualists who did not require government assistance. However, where their access to public land or export rights were threatened they were quick to use political channels to influence change.

The year 1884 was significant for the Kohrs and Bielenberg operation from an environmental perspective. The completed railway to Chicago allowed for easy access to those markets which, more or less, eliminated the need for long drives of Montana cattle. Despite this, Kohrs did not consolidate his cattle onto one pasture. His decision to maintain numerous pastures was likely based on the growing concern of overcrowding, isolated weather events and disease from imported stock. Having cattle spread around would prevent all his stock being hit with disease during an outbreak and additional pastures alleviated the risk of overcrowding. With respect to isolated weather events Kohrs had been hit as well. In 1881, the winter that killed 5,000 Texas cattle created several ice dams on the Sun River and many of Kohrs cattle were

⁵⁴ *Helena Weekly Herald*, April 24, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁵⁵ *The New Northwest*, August 1, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

drowned, some died from exposure. The losses were, according to Kohrs, about 15% but were “...in a local rather than general sense...”⁵⁶ This short quotation suggests that the subsequent investments made by Kohrs reflected his belief in the value of spreading his cattle on several pastures, an ecological and economic safety-net, because a loss on one herd could be offset by gains on another. He still had diverse investments in mining and stakes in water that would help offset his finances should cattle prices crash. Furthermore, the breeding program that had been launched in earnest was paying off and stock with the “CK” brand, especially shorthorns, were in demand all over Montana.⁵⁷ Due to his long time in the business he was respected and well connected with bankers and stock commissioners. His seat at the cattleman’s meetings allowed for him to shape policy and practice throughout the territory. Ultimately, what Kohrs had established by 1884 was a business model with enough stability and diversity to offset environmental or market fluctuations. In the coming years, when Montana cattlemen would face both environmental and economic challenges, Kohrs would be well positioned to expand his operation while other men went bankrupt.

In 1885, Kohrs was elected as part of the “Cowboy Legislature”, so called because “...nearly all laws on the statute books relating to the cattle industry were passed that winter.”⁵⁸ Some of the more noteworthy statutes were “No. 63, to amend section 11 of an act to suppress and prevent contagious diseases among domestic animals and Texas cattle” and “No. 57, for the better protection of the live stock interests of Montana.”⁵⁹ What, exactly, was meant by “stock interests” was not fully explained in the resolution, although it is certain that Kohrs would have

⁵⁶ Conrad Kohrs, "A Veteran's Experience in the Western Cattle Trade," *Breeders' Gazette* (1912): 6.

⁵⁷ *The New Northwest*, May and June, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁵⁸ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 81.

⁵⁹ *The Dillon Tribune*, March 21, 1885. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

considered this another “well-run” legislature. What was important for Kohrs was the resolution to suppress and prevent contagious disease. The risk of diseased cattle was low but just enough to justify the type of protectionism that further enabled his use of public land.

While in the Montana legislature, Kohrs organized the Montana Stockgrowers Association meeting while the government was sitting. By setting the meeting at this time the Association had access to influential law makers through Kohrs. The Association’s first meeting was held at Miles City, April 4 1885.⁶⁰ A resolution was passed to write the government in regard to the condition of the northern Cheyenne on the Rosebud reservation who were in a near starving state. The altruism of the letter, however, loses much of its shine when the proposed solution, selling Montana cattle to the government, is considered.⁶¹ It is noteworthy that none of the resolutions from that day had anything to do with the grass, water or the environment. The reason for the lack of environmental concern was in the years between 1882 and 1885 most ranchers had experienced a temporary equilibrium. As a consequence, from the perspective of ranchers, booster representations of the industry still rang true.

What the cattlemen and associations knew but could not control was the massive numbers of cattle being imported into Montana depleting the quality of grazing land. This problem, as much as the possibility of disease, was the inspiration behind their attempts to keep southern cattle out of Montana. Kohrs estimated that the number of cattle imported in 1884 was 75,000 in addition to the 94,000 that had been imported previous years.⁶² The reason for the massive influx of cattle is complicated, yet environmental misinformation certainly played a role. Up to 1885 the information available to the cattlemen of Montana regarding the cattle industry

⁶⁰ *The River Press*, May 6, 1885. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁶¹ *The River Press*, May 6, 1885. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁶² *New Northwest*, August 18, 1884, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

had been overwhelmingly positive. On the eve of the disaster, when both Kohrs and Granville Stuart had serious concerns about the future of their industry, *The River Press* reported that the future of the cattle business “had diminished but still had handsome profits.”⁶³ Part of the false sense of security came from a cold and snowy winter in 1884/1885 that did not cause alarming numbers of stock loss. Further mitigating the severity of the winter was a dry spring and good summer that allowed cattle to rebound quickly. In March, stockmen and allied Associations along the Yellowstone and Musselshell were “congratulating each other on the small percentage of loss among cattle...”⁶⁴ Considering the coming years, had the 1884/1885 winter caused more stock losses Montana cattlemen may have been better prepared for the winter of 1886/1887. However, this was another case where Montana cattle were flourishing with no special actions taken by ranchers.

In 1885, Kohrs and Granville Stuart considered selling out to European investors but the deal fell through. Stuart, for one, felt that the range was depleted beyond saving, a concern he made clear to Kohrs in a letter from June, 1885 where he wrote “I hope the sale will go for I am afraid of the overstocking that is going on, if we could prevent that, I would never want to sell. It would be the best business in the world.”⁶⁵ The reason overstocking in 1885/1886 was such a concern to Stuart was that there were twelve herds grazing with their cattle on the Fort Maginnis range. In previous years the DHS had been the only operation there. An additional concern for Stuart was that the majority of the cattle had been at Fort Maginnis for three consecutive years. Weak prices, free grass and a fundamentally poor understanding of the environment had led

⁶³ *The River Press*, June 4, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁶⁴ *The Billings Herald*, March 14, 1885. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁶⁵ Letter, Granville Stuart to Conrad Kohrs, June 1885, MC61 Box 1-3, Granville Stuart Papers 1863-1919, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

ranchers to hold back cattle they normally would have sold. Because cattle had been there for so many consecutive years, Kohrs claimed he leased over 200,000 acres of land in the Cypress Hills of Alberta with the expectation of driving their cattle across.⁶⁶ If true, this showed good sense. Kohrs was in the financial position to provide his cattle leased land when public lands were becoming crowded. In an interview published September 10, 1886 when asked about moving his cattle to Canada he stated “I do not think over 20,000 head will be sent over...” because “Our range is very dry this year and the ranges are getting crowded.”⁶⁷ Acquiring additional land was a strategy that Kohrs had used in previous years. However, he had not previously gone to the expense of leasing land. The cattle that were supposed to be driven across never made it because “The river was bad and only a few crossed and these had to be left in the Little Rockies as it was too late to take them across the line.”⁶⁸ The lack of evidence for the Canadian lease opens this story to skepticism. The only explanation is that Kohrs was referring to an arrangement with an Alberta lease holder or that he had arranged something with the Blood or Peigan. Nevertheless, that Kohrs thought the measure was necessary indicated a recognition of the decreasing quality of the Montana grasslands.

Despite the mounting problems, especially crowding ranges, Kohrs remained optimistic about the coming winter. In the same September 10 interview he mentioned that:

Floweree thinks that we will lose about 25 per cent., if we have a hard winter, and the idea seems to be out that it will be a hard one. I don't know why it is—probably because I never borrow much trouble out of the future—but I do not apprehend a hard winter on cattle. It may be cold, but it is the heavy snow storms we have to fear, and I don't think we will have them. Besides, despite the dry season, our cattle are fat and strong—in better condition than they were last year.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ There is no evidence that he did lease this land.

⁶⁷ *The New Northwest*, September 10, 1886. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁶⁸ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 83.

⁶⁹ *The New Northwest*, September 10, 1886. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

Disconcertingly, Kohrs contradicted himself in the same interview when he mentioned that “while the average condition of the cattle is good, there are not so many fatted as usual, and we only ship in that condition.”⁷⁰ It is difficult to say if Kohrs actually believed his words. Considering he had (possibly) leased additional land in Canada it was more likely he was speaking as a community and industry leader and did not want to start a panic.

There were five interconnected forces that had prevailed in Montana prior to the winter of 1886-1887. The first problem was increased cattle numbers, additional stock had caused an oversupply of beef on the Chicago markets, which lowered prices. Most ranchers were optimists and thought that prices would recover so they held back thousands of cattle on ranges that were already crowded. The second factor was that much of the new stock grazing in Montana came from Illinois, Michigan, Iowa and Missouri. Stock from these states were not hardy enough to make it through a difficult winter without feeding. The third problem was a prolonged spring and summer drought in Texas had prompted cattlemen there to drive their herds north in search of adequate grass. Texas cattle, as had been proved in 1881, were not capable of living through a hard winter. This was especially true when they had not had an opportunity to gain the requisite weight during the spring and summer.⁷¹ The fourth problem was that Montana ranchers had experienced several years of temporary equilibrium reinforcing booster representations. While success is not traditionally a problem, the temporary equilibrium entrenched inadequate ranching methods and diminished the need for precautionary measures. The final problem was a fundamental misunderstanding of the environment. The misunderstanding of the environment was the cause of all the other problems, with the exception of the drought. As noted by Kohrs in

⁷⁰ *The New Northwest*, September 10, 1886. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁷¹ Todd, *MA Thesis*, 85.

1881, any cattle losses during the winter tended to be “local rather than general.”⁷² It was unreasonable for cattlemen to expect the dangers of a hard winter when other hard winters had not decimated their stock, most recently in 1884/1885. Most importantly, the years and years of booster material, starting in the 1860s and culminating with *Beef Bonanza* had never counseled caution with respect to managing cattle through the winter. The optimism of Kohrs during that late summer interview, when considered in this light, may have been genuine. The environment had not given him an adequate reason to believe that anything catastrophic could happen.

In November 1886, the snow started in earnest and blocked roads. Snow had fallen to a depth of over a foot and continued to pile up through January. The *Livingston Enterprise* foreshadowed the coming weather calamity when, after a brief warming spell from a chinook, they wrote “The temperature has ranged above the freezing point a greater part of the time, which has kept the snow at a uniform depth of about one foot, and should the present condition of the weather be followed by a severe cold spell it might result seriously to the stock interests.”⁷³ At the end of the month a blast of Artic air turned the softened snow to ice sealing the grass underneath, just beyond the hooves and mouths of hungry cattle and horses. In *Free Grass to Fences* Robert Fletcher described the sad situation, “Starving and helpless, the famished stock drifted, piled up in coulees, stumbled over cutbanks, or just froze in their tracks. It was awful.”⁷⁴ On February 22, 1887 Kohrs received a letter from his brother letting him know that they could assess their losses.⁷⁵

The DHS Ranch

⁷² Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 88.

⁷³ *The Livingstone Enterprise*, January 1, 1887. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁷⁴ Fletcher, *Free Grass to Fences*, 88.

⁷⁵ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 86.

In the summer of 1879, on the cusp of the great cattle boom in Montana and shortly before large numbers Texas cattle were trailed north, Samuel Hauser, Andrew Davis, and Granville Stuart entered the ranching business. Stuart, a long-time resident of Montana who had experience working with cattle, was named superintendent and general manager. The first summer and fall were dedicated to purchasing herds which eventually totaled 9,000 head. Determined to grow the brand and improve the quality of the stock, Andrew Davis purchased twenty-one thoroughbred bulls in the mid-west. As noted, Kohrs had also purchased breeding stock. The DHS likely intended to improve their Montana stock using the same method. The home ranch was, after some set-backs, located at the base of the Judith Mountains in central Montana. Stuart considered this location “the very garden spot of Montana.”⁷⁶

It may seem strange that Stuart, who had spent much of his youth mining and stock raising in the Deer Lodge Valley, would choose to raise cattle on the plains. He did so because of the appeal of the Texas system and public land, although he was never fully sold on the Texas system. For example, he did not abandon the ranching methods from the intermountain valley with which he was familiar. As a result, Stuart was one of the first ranchers to voice a concern over the risk of overstocking. During the summer of that first year he directed the construction of stables, fencing around the adjacent hay lands, cabins, blacksmith shops, and other necessary buildings. The ranch was sitting on 800 acres that were “owned” through the “law of customary range”, but would eventually be acquired legally in 1880.⁷⁷ At the same time the necessary infrastructure was being built, the DHS livestock was being driven onto the range to allow them to acclimate to the colder environment. This strategy, as much as winter feeding,

⁷⁶ Stuart, *Forty Years on the Frontier*, 144-145.

⁷⁷ Stuart, *Forty Years on the Frontier*, 164.

was significant as southern and eastern cattle tended to fair more poorly in the cold unless given time to gain weight and become accustomed to the weather. All told, the cost of the ranch by the fall of 1880/1881 was \$152,933.51.⁷⁸

The early summer of 1881 was spent negotiating with the military for protection from Indigenous people. In a letter sent to Major Dangerfield Parker, Stuart wrote, “Our experience during the last nine months has demonstrated that stock raising cannot be carried on if Indians are allowed to roam over the ranges...”⁷⁹ The dissatisfaction that Stuart, and other cattlemen, had with the Indigenous population was an ongoing theme and resulted in their endorsement of legislation to restrict Indigenous people’s movement. For its part, the military was not just being intransigent toward Stuart. Some fault lies at his feet as well. Part of the reason that Stuart had located the home range at Ford’s Creek was its proximity to 800 acres of hay lands which, as noted before, he had started to fence in almost immediately. Stuart did not own the land but decided to fence it regardless. In July 1881 the military ordered Stuart to halt construction as they had claimed the hay lands, and the ranch, for military use. However, thanks to Hauser’s political influence and Stuart’s stubborn refusal to move his fences, the boundaries of the military land were redrawn in 1882. The new boundaries of the Fort returned land coveted by the DHS to the public domain, with only a small loss of meadow.⁸⁰ In a subsequent letter to Hauser, Stuart suggested that the loss of hay lands could be offset by irrigation, and as a result he was willing to accept the compromise.⁸¹ These actions demonstrated that Stuart, despite running cattle on the open range, was not completely sold on the Texas system described by Terry

⁷⁸ Ledger, DHS Ranch, February 22, 1881, MC61 Volume 1, Granville Stuart Papers 1863-1919, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁷⁹ Stuart, *Forty Years on the Frontier*, 145.

⁸⁰ General Orders No. 12, Department of the Dakota, May 20, 1882, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁸¹ Letter, Stuart to Hauser, August 14 and 20, 1882, MC37, Box 20-21, Samuel Thomas Hauser Papers 1864-1919, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

Jordan. He understood from his years of raising stock in the intermountain valleys around Deer Lodge that having available feed during the winter was necessary and that he would fight to keep access to those lands.

The first large cattle sale made by the DHS was in the summer of 1881 when 1,286 head of cattle were sold to Kohrs. They sold to Kohrs because he had experience in the Chicago market and they sellers thought he would pay a better price.⁸² The cattle were sold at a profit of \$39,246 and that money was used to pay for ranch expenses and reinvested in additional stock. While the ranch was operational at a profit it did not post a dividend for that year. The success of the DHS in 1881 was the result of a “temporary equilibrium.”⁸³ The conditions on their range were amiable and their cattle did well. This season was the first of several where the DHS had a level of relative prosperity that did not challenge them to change their ranching method. If anything, the success reinforced the efficacy of the Texas system making the other partners less inclined to listen to Stuart’s concerns about overstocking.

Almost from the outset of large scale ranching on the Montana plains Stuart saw environmental and ecological problems. His first issue was with the presence of 3,000 Indigenous people he blamed for stealing or killing cattle and requiring additional hands which drove up costs. In an 1881 report he mentioned that 1,300 cattle, roughly the number that they sold that year, had been killed by Indigenous peoples. He had suggested filing a claim against the

⁸² Letter, Andrew Davis to Stuart, August 19, 1881, MC61 Box 1-3, Granville Stuart Papers 1863-1918, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁸³ Cunfer, *On the Great Plains*.

government for the lost income but did not follow through.⁸⁴ Furthermore, Stuart, almost immediately, saw a flaw with the Texas system. In a letter to Hauser he wrote:

It seems easy to run a cattle business in the reckless, happy go lucky style which has generally prevailed in the past than he who tried to run a cattle ranch more on business principals and guide it successfully past the dangers of hard winters, Indian depredations, exhausted or overstocked ranges, and the many other lesser evils will be greatly surprised to find how expensive it is when he ceases trusting to luck and tries to reduce it to a systematic basis. In point of fact the conditions have greatly changed, and those halcyon days have gone never to return. Those who have been in cattle for the last ten years or so have had the very cream of the business, for the interior mountain valleys were much better adapted... They had better grass and more of it. The shape of the valleys rendered herding unnecessary and the abundance of game kept the Indians from taking cattle. Those who still continue in the business are now compelled to cut down their herds or leave those former ranges thus incurring heavy expense in moving out to an inferior range where their herds are decimated by Indians, wolves, and hard winters, and where their cattle if not herded ramble far from their home range on the great plains.⁸⁵

The description from Stuart was less enthusiastic than would be expected in 1881. It is possible that Stuart was feeling the financial pressure of the first few years of operation or he missed the style of ranching with which he was accustomed. An additional possibility was that Stuart understood the Montana climate better than his contemporaries. Whatever the reason, this letter reinforces the idea that Stuart never fully bought into the Texas system that was prominent during the early 1880s. The problem was, as the least powerful member of the DHS, how could he make the other partners see the danger?

Fortunately for the somewhat morose Stuart, the 1881/1882 winter was mild on his range and the cattle came through in good condition. Before the round-up started 1,528 cattle were added to his herd which, including new calves, had swelled by 3,143.⁸⁶ When it came time for

⁸⁴ Letter, Stuart to Hauser, September 6, 1881, MC61 Box 1-3, Samuel Thomas Hauser Papers 1864-1919, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁸⁵ Letter, Stuart to Hauser, November 12, 1881, MC37 Box 20-21, Samuel Thomas Hauser Papers 1864-1919, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁸⁶ Letter, Stuart to Hauser, 1882, MC37 Box 20-21, Samuel Thomas Hauser Papers 1864-1919, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

the cattle to be rounded up, Stuart noticed that Kohrs, T.C. Power, Charles Belden and others were running stock near-by. The economically minded Stuart held a meeting where a cooperative round-up was established. A cooperative arrangement, he felt, would save money and increase efficiency.⁸⁷ The round-up was a success and, as predicted, saved everyone involved both time and money. For Stuart and the DHS, 1882 was a good year as a dividend of \$37,000 was posted.⁸⁸ For the DHS, 1882 was a second consecutive “temporary equilibrium”, despite Stuart’s growing unease with ranching in Montana due to overcrowding.⁸⁹

The following year Kohrs purchased a 1/3 stake in the DHS ranch essentially merging the two large operations. Stuart was in Helena serving as the President of the Montana Territory legislature (Kohrs was sitting as well) a position that allowed him to influence the regulation of the cattle industry and protect Montana cattle. The *Herald* reported that a number of stockmen had met with Stuart to discuss “...what legislation is necessary to protect our interests.”⁹⁰ Stuart’s first goal was to protect Montana cattle from diseased animals trailing in from Texas by establishing a Commission to prevent their import. Again, Stuart was likely concerned about access to public land and overstocking. He was using the threat of disease to keep the overall numbers of cattle in Montana down. Despite the Territorial Assembly passing the order Governor Potts vetoed it fearing that it would put too much power in the hands of cattle ranchers.⁹¹ The objection by Potts against importing diseased animals for reasons of power reinforces that the question was about land and not cattle. Governor Potts was not hostile to the

⁸⁷ Stuart, *Forty Years on the Frontier*, 165-166.

⁸⁸ Ledger, DHS Ranch, MC61 Volume 1, Granville Stuart Collection, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁸⁹ Cunfer, *On The Great Plains*.

⁹⁰ *Herald*, February 6, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁹¹ William S. Reese, “Granville Stuart of the DHS Ranch, 1879-1887,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 31, no. 3 (1981): 21.

cattle industry but he had to balance competing corporate and mining interests.⁹² Having their order blocked was a significant setback for Stuart. However, he was able to secure some successes that would make ranching more effective and, ironically, reinforce both the temporary equilibrium and booster representations of the industry. For example, a bounty law on predators and a bill to protect stock from raids by Indigenous people and Whites were passed. Both of these laws were effective at increasing stock numbers and thereby pressure on the grasslands.

In Stuart's *Forty Years on the Frontier* he puts the genesis of overstocking in the year 1883. In the fall of that year the DHS herd had roughly 13,000 head and by the following year that number swelled to 15,000. The total number of cattle in the Territory totaled 600,000. Part of the reason for the drastic increase was cattlemen holding their cattle due to a poor market. The additional cattle and the depleting grasslands was noticed by Stuart. Concerned, Stuart wrote of the deteriorating situation that "the ranges were free to all and no man could say, with authority, when a range was overstocked."⁹³ It is clear, however, that he felt as though they were. In 1885, Stuart's predilection towards organization and his experience in the industry would inspire Korhs, Hauser, and H.P. Kennett, to name him the Superintendent and Assistant Secretary of the newly formed Pioneer Cattle Company.⁹⁴ Again, Stuart was in the position of being responsible for thousands of cattle but in a weak position against the company owners. Almost all cattlemen were confident that the Texas system was the right mode of land use in Montana because nothing to that time had suggested otherwise. Sadly, Stuart's increasing anxiety about overstocking fell on deaf ears.

⁹² Spence, *Territorial Politics and Government in Montana*, 116-150.

⁹³ Stuart, *Forty Years on the Frontier*, 165-185.

⁹⁴ *Helena Weekly Independent*, January 8, 1885. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

Politically, 1885 was the apex of power for stockmen in Montana. The Montana Stock Growers Association remained a potent force but was hard pressed to fight against the mining and corporate interests that had found their way into the Territorial government. After the elections of 1886 Stuart was concerned that the small amount of progress they had made protecting their industry would be reversed. He wrote to the secretary of the Stock Growers Association “There will be a determined effort to repeal the bit & Inspection laws at the coming session...every d___d thief & their sympathizers (who are legion) are very active in working up public opinion against us.”⁹⁵ Despite Stuart’s prediction the laws were not undone. But, due to a dearth of representatives, the interests of cattlemen began to fall to the wayside. The loss of political power could not have come at a worse time. The summer and winter of 1886/1887 were disastrous for cattlemen in Montana and, despite the rugged individualists that they were, a voice in politics would have been beneficial.

The summer drought that started the 1886/1887 disaster extended into the fall. In a letter to F.C. Robinson, another rancher, Stuart wrote:

No Rain, yet. And today the smoke has settled down so dense that one cannot see a mile, and can’t tell where it comes from, but think from the west. Our water is all drying up and we are now moving part of our cattle north, and the rest down into the bad lands on the Mo [sic] River, for water they must have. The outlook is fast becoming desperate. ⁹⁶

As already noted, only a small number of the cattle were ever trailed north, the rest remained on the DHS home range. Stuart called the home range “over-crowded” in 1881 and after several years of cattle increase it was considerably worse. The frustration that Stuart felt is palpable in his letter. He had been warning stock raisers and governments alike that the ranges were

⁹⁵ Letter, Granville Stuart to Russel Harrison, December 7, 1886, MC61 Box 1-5, Granville Stuart Papers 1864-1919, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

⁹⁶ Letter, Stuart to F.C. Robertson, September 2, 1886, MC61 Box 1-5, Granville Stuart Collection 1864-1919, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

overcrowded and now it was too late. According to Stuart, 50% of the cattle, all cattle, were lost during the 1886/1887 winter. For Stuart, this level of stock loss constituted "...the death knell of the range cattle business on anything like the scale it had been run on before."⁹⁷ It should be noted that Kohrs mentioned Stuart was less dour about his predictions until the spring round-up when branding numbers plummeted from 8,000 to 900, an 89% loss.⁹⁸ Stuart's prediction that the industry was finished was prophetic for many ranchers who could not find the capital, will or energy to rebuild their herds.

The Recovery: A Lesson in Understanding Your Environment

The central lesson of the 1886/1887 disaster was that booster literature was wrong. Almost every prediction and claim they had made about the grasses, water, and climate had proved false. The temporary equilibrium that had reinforced those booster representations had laid a false trail and thousands of cattle paid the price. Kohrs, and by association, Stuart, had lost an estimated 2,300 head from a single herd. The total value of just those animals was \$30,000.00.⁹⁹ This was a large sum, especially when considering how depressed prices were at the time. However, not all the news was bad. Due to Kohrs' maintenance of the home ranch at Deer Lodge in the intermountain valley, the breeding stock of shorthorns and Herefords had made it through the winter. Estimated total losses for Kohrs were about fifty percent on the public land while he lost only eight percent in Deer Lodge.¹⁰⁰ It is impossible to tell if the early improvements at Deer Lodge were made due to a better understanding of the environment or were just for his valuable breeding stock. An interview from 1885 does suggest that Kohrs had

⁹⁷ Stuart, *Forty Years on the Frontier*, 236.

⁹⁸ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 86.

⁹⁹ Kohrs, "A Veteran's Experience", 1329.

¹⁰⁰ Fletcher, *Free Grass to Fences*, 89.

listened to Stuart with respect to depleting grasslands. When asked about the quality of the range he replied “It takes 20 acres on a new range to feed one cow, after the range has been grazed two years it will take almost 25 acres and after six years, it will take 40 acres.”¹⁰¹ In the years following 1886/1887 Kohrs grew Deer Lodge significantly indicating that despite his predilection for using public land he knew there were limits.

The winter of 1886/1887 has been subjected to speculation from historians and more than a little mythology from ranchers. However, there are definite facts that suggest some cattlemen understood the plain’s environment better despite the booster representations and years of temporary equilibrium. Prior to 1886 Kohrs had begun to cut grasses for hay, irrigate his lands as best he could, fence crops, and provide winter feed for his cattle in the intermountain region. He was not an advocate for stocking the plains with as many cattle as possible, unless they were his. Kohrs advocated for a controlled and organized system of grazing cattle on public lands. He was also a firm believer in raising the quality of his herd through breeding with eastern stock. While it is possible, even likely, that his enthusiasm for controlled importation of cattle was self-interested, it should also be recognized that it reflected his understanding of the environment.

By March, 1887 a grim situation was apparent all over Montana. At the spring meeting of the Montana Stock Growers Association in April the new president opined “had the winter continued twenty days longer, we would not have had much necessity of an Association.”¹⁰² For Granville Stuart, the years of running a cattle operation and cautioning others against the dangers of overstocking could not save him from being scapegoated for the losses incurred in 1886/1887. The other ranch owners and investors of the DHS were critical of Stuart’s methods. As an

¹⁰¹ Conrad Kohrs, Interview in Helena Montana, 1885, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

¹⁰² Reese, “Stuart and the DHS”, 26.

additional attack they questioned his generosity to his friend Reece Anderson, who had been living on the DHS property for free since 1879.¹⁰³ In a letter to Hauser it was observed that Stuart himself was considered to be “alright in his present position” but “the location of the ranch is wrong, it is too near the Fort...” With respect to Reece Anderson “I cannot run a ranch and have to hire his half breed relatives or have they [sic] and their friends around and do it economically...”¹⁰⁴ From that point forward Stuart was even more powerless. It was an unfitting end to a great career for Stuart. He understood the environment of the Great Plains and while setting up the DHS operation took steps in infrastructure and hay lands that others thought unnecessary. He organized round-ups and through his political actions he tried to control the unsustainable numbers of cattle grazing on a limited grassland. However, all of his previous work was for naught. Thousands of cattle had either froze or starved to death and someone had to shoulder the blame. In the years following the hard winter Kohrs remained at the top of the cattle industry. By relying on his own experience, advice from Stuart and additional capital from investors, Kohrs would grow his herd. The success over the winter at Deer Lodge inspired Kohrs to add twenty thousand acres. The additional land was used to grow crops for wintering stock and to become a leader in cattle breeding.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Reese, “Stuart and the DHS”, 26.

¹⁰⁴ Letter, H. P. Kennett to Hauser, January 29, 1887, MC 37 Box 13-17, Samuel Thomas Hauser Papers 1864-1919, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

¹⁰⁵ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 89.

Chapter 6: The Cochrane, Walrond and A7

During the 1880s environmental representations of the Alberta grasslands had been steeped in several decades of boosterism. For example, an 1881 letter from Fort Macleod reprinted in the *Helena Weekly Herald* reported that “cattle have done splendidly here this winter. None have died from cold or snow—neither calves nor cows.”¹ For this reason, much like Montana, the Alberta environment was thought to have unlimited potential for stock-raising and thousands of acres were leased to ranchers. It was into this perceived environment that the Cochrane, Walrond and the A7 ranches were established. Based on the positive representations of the Alberta environment, Cochrane, McEachran and Cross were led to believe that the Texas system, popular south of the border, would also be the most advantageous mode of land-use. However, this system was flawed resulting in numerous environmental difficulties. The difficulties faced by ranchers engendered a series of adaptations to land-use and a far more nuanced perception of the Alberta environment. As argued in the previous chapters, the difficulty in adapting to environmental pressures during the 1880s was what separated successful operations from those that were not. This chapter will bring that same analysis to the Cochrane, Walrond and A7 ranches by examining how they responded to environmental, economic and political pressures leading up to the winter of 1886/1887 and how they were able to respond in the years after.

In *Cattle Kingdom*, historian Edward Brado relates an apocryphal tale where John George (“Kootenai”) Brown met a man driving a wagon across the Canadian plains. White people being rare at the time Brown engaged the stranger in conversation about the viability of cattle ranching

¹ *Helena Weekly Herald*, April 14, 1881. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

in the area. The stranger felt that cattle could surely survive relatively untended in such a mild climate. The stranger's logic was that an area that had once supported thousands and thousands of bison could support cattle. However, Brown, a longtime resident, disagreed. Reflecting on his own experience with the Canadian environment, Brown felt "...it was a delusion...that cattle could just as easily survive on the plains as the buffalo once did. Unlike cattle, buffalo ate the grass right down to the roots, and then moved onto a new range..."² Brown also told the stranger that cattle, unlike bison, turn their backs on a cold wind and simply wander until they pile up against an obstruction. Lastly, Brown added that cattlemen would have to cut hay for feed during the winter because while chinooks were relatively common they could not be relied upon to expose grass often enough to keep cattle fed. Essentially, John George ("Kootenai") Brown told the stranger that the Texas system would not work on the Canadian plains. At the end of the story Brado reveals that the stranger was Matthew Cochrane and "...in the following years...he had many occasions to consider Brown's sound advice and to calculate the cost of disregarding it."³

In June, 1881 the *Benton Weekly Record* reported that the Cochrane cattle herd, purchased from Conrad Kohrs, was "...now on their way up the river to Benton..."⁴ where it would be met by James Walker. In the same edition it was noted that the Cochrane Rancho alone intended "to put in 8,000 to 10,000 head this year, with 150 imported pure bred Hereford and Polled Angus bulls."⁵ The herd numbered between six and seven thousand head in total and was entrusted to the I.G. Baker Company for the final stage of transportation across the border. The

² Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 59.

³ Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 59.

⁴ *The Benton Weekly Record*, June 23, 1881. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁵ *The Benton Weekly Record*, June 23, 1881. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

drive would not get under way until August, which left a scarce amount of time to both get the cattle to their pasture and let them acclimate to their surroundings before winter set in.⁶ Frank Strong, of the I.G. Baker Company, divided the herd between steers and cows and calves order to increase the speed with which the cattle were driven. L.V. Kelly, author of *The Range Men*, referred to the drive as "...the criterion for hard driving, as no such great numbers of cattle have ever since been moved so rapidly by trail. The poor animals were "tin-canned" and "slickered" from morning until night...and so weary when darkness came that they preferred resting to eating."⁷ The second herd of cows and calves fared even worse due to their smaller size and lower endurance. Wagons followed behind to pick up what calves could be loaded up but when the wagons were full, the calves were either traded by cowboys along the trail or left to die. Both Kelly and Brado note that hundreds of calves died this way.⁸ The cost to the Cochrane Rancho was significant and the cattle had not yet been branded.

The cattle, foot sore and weak, arrived at the Cochrane range area where they were first counted by Walker and then sent to get their bearings on their new pasture. By all accounts, the cattle were not in great shape after the drive. Compounding that problem was that winter in 1881/1882 was early. As a consequence, the cattle could not recover their strength and "hundreds died before they could locate shelter and water..."⁹ The death of these drive-weakened cattle in Canada in 1881/1882 are strikingly similar to the deaths of 5,000 Texas cattle in Montana that same winter. It was a stark difference between the experience of Stuart and Korhs in Montana, whose early temporary equilibrium was important to reinforcing booster representations of the

⁶ According to the *Benton Weekly Record* by mid-August the cattle were still in Montana.
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁷ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 147.

⁸ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 148 and Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 67.

⁹ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 148.

environment and the Texas system. However, even without the early success, and in fact quite the opposite, Cochrane stood steadfast with booster representations and took this loss as being an isolated event and not indicative of the Alberta grassland's ability to support cattle.

Cochrane's woes were exacerbated by extensive prairie fires and Indigenous peoples killing his already depleted herds. On January, 18 the *Helena Weekly Herald* noted that "...the Indians have been killing large numbers of the Cochrane Ranch Company's cattle..."¹⁰ An arrest was made at Blackfoot crossing but the accused was released after the NWMP were surrounded and forced to surrender their prisoner.¹¹ Only a week later *The Benton Weekly Record* reported, "...extensive prairie fires are burning in the Bow River country and that the range of the Cochrane Ranch Company has been largely burned over."¹² In February, 1882 *The Benton Weekly Record* summed up the first year for the Cochrane Ranch by writing "It has been reported in Ottawa that the Cochrane Ranch Company...has lost 2000 head of cattle...Their herd has been badly scattered and a portion of the range burned over..."¹³ The rocky start for the Cochrane Rancho was directly related to the relative inexperience they had working in the Alberta environment. The booster material available at the time had suggested that winters were mild, which engendered a fundamental misunderstanding of the environment. The only problem to which Cochrane could have been aware were prairie fires. What remained to be seen was if the ranch managers learned from their stock losses.

The first drive and winter was not a total loss, despite how dire the events were. What was impressed on the operators and cowmen running the animals was the relative endurance and

¹⁰ *Helena Weekly Herald*, January 18, 1882. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

¹¹ *Helena Weekly Herald*, January 18, 1882. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

¹² *Benton Weekly Record*, January 26, 1882. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

¹³ *The Benton Weekly Record*, February 2, 1882. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

durability of different breeds. According to Kelly “The black Polled Angus beasts stood up best of any, the Herefords rated second, and the Shorthorns suffered most of all.”¹⁴ This assessment fits within the Montana experience as well. The shorthorns that Kohrs imported from the eastern United States were sent to Deer Lodge or Hooban’s Bottom where they were fed through the winter. The operators of the ranch took notice of this discrepancy and decided to improve their herd by ordering one hundred and thirty six Hereford and Polled Angus pure bred bulls from England¹⁵. The following week, on February 9, advertisements were placed in numerous newspapers calling for any stock raisers who wished to import pure bred cattle from England to contact James Walker.¹⁶ The recognition that some breeds are more durable than others was significant for the adaptive process and one that was prevalent on both sides of the border.

In the spring of 1882, the cattle that had been scattered needed to be rounded up and properly branded. In newspapers going back to January, the Cochrane ranch had been promulgating the appearance of their brand, a common practice in country where fences were rare and cattle common. Duncan McEachran wrote to James Walker that he was to round up every cow on their range and put the Cochrane brand on its shoulder. When the round up began several locals came to assist and make some extra money. However, their enthusiasm waned considerably when the Cochrane employees gathered up all the animals, including some that did not belong to them.¹⁷ The actions of the Cochrane during this round-up generated a significant amount of protest, but Walker was determined to follow McEachran’s orders to the letter. The whole debacle resulted in the locals abandoning the round-up. Adding to the injury the locals

¹⁴ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 148.

¹⁵ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 149.

¹⁶ *The Benton Weekly Record*, February 9, 1882. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

¹⁷ Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 68.

gathered up their cattle and likely some that were not theirs. The incident here was indicative of McEachran being a difficult manager who was focused on the bottom line, something that he would carry to the Walrond Ranch after 1883. However, disregarding the local ranchers was a missed opportunity. Local stock raisers knew where to find cattle that had drifted while the Cochrane staff, new to the range as they were, did not. Ultimately, what the first round-up engendered was a feeling of animosity toward the Cochrane operation and a missed opportunity to learn about their environment.¹⁸

Cattle Raising Starting in Earnest

In spring 1882, the Cochrane was in the business of growing its herd. In the May 4, 1882 edition of *The Benton Weekly Record* it was reported “Major James H. Walker, manager of the Cochrane Ranch Company, of Bow River, is at the Chateau House, having lately returned from Dillon where he has been interviewing stock-men with cattle to sell.”¹⁹ The problem for Walker was that McEachran insisted on micromanaging the arrangements for cattle purchases. As a consequence, when Walker arranged a deal with Poindexter and Orr, two of the largest cattlemen in Montana, he was called back to Fort Benton by wire before the deal was finalized. McEachran went behind Walker’s back and made a deal to have I.G. Baker’s firm purchase the stock for both organizations, thinking that by making a larger purchase they could secure a better deal. The deal struck by McEachran, however, went sour. As a consequence, Walker was forced to return to Poindexter and Orr and repurchase the original herd. Unfortunately, the price of cattle had increased significantly over those few weeks and the herd now cost an additional \$25,000. The *River Press* reported that “...they paid \$25 a head, or in the aggregate, \$150,000.”²⁰ The

¹⁸ Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 68.

¹⁹ *The Benton Weekly Record*, May 4, 1882. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

²⁰ *River Press*, May 24, 1882. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

incident resulted in Walker tendering his resignation, effective as soon as a replacement could be found.²¹

This series of events had cost the Cochrane operation dearly. First, the loss of Walker was unfortunate. By all reckoning he was qualified for the work and, as can be inferred from the round-up and Montana incidents, dedicated to the Cochrane operation and following the desires of his employers. His resignation would become official in September of that year.²² Secondly, the additional \$25,000 for cattle was damaging to the bottom line. The ranch was certainly well financed but this expense was unnecessary and born out of poor, absentee management. Lastly, the time wasted buying the herd in Montana would have been better served getting the cattle to Canada and acclimating them to their new range. Considering the previous winter it is surprising that timing was not at the absolute forefront of any cattle purchasing decisions.

The fall and winter of 1882/1883 was another trying time for the Cochrane Ranche. Yet, oddly enough, the smaller ranches surrounding Calgary did not suffer to the same extent as the large Cochrane herd. The Poindexter and Orr stock left Montana in August and were therefore slightly late getting across the border. At Fish Creek, about twelve miles from the Cochrane range, "...they struck a severe snow storm, and were delayed some eight days."²³ Orr told the *River Express* that the drive, to that point, had been relatively easy²⁴; however, the animals were still weak and tired. The storm had buried the trails, effectively blocking the cattle from their destination. Poindexter was an experienced cattleman and suggested that the animals needed to be rested for a month before they could proceed any further. Walker disagreed and forced the

²¹ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 151.

²² *The Benton Weekly Record*, September 14, 1882. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

²³ *River Press*, November 15, 1882. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

²⁴ *River Press*, November 15, 1882. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

drive to continue despite the weather and condition of the stock. The push here was an odd move, especially for an experienced cattleman like Walker and the previous years' losses. It is likely that Walker was following orders to get the cattle to the Cochrane against his own good sense. The drive continued for the final few miles until they had reached the Cochrane range, where Poindexter said to Walker "Here they are. I have carried out my contract and delivered them at the Big Hill. Count'em now, because half of them will be dead tomorrow!"²⁵ Poindexter's parting words for Walker proved prophetic.

The time when the cattle arrived on the Cochrane range was as bad as it could be. It was far too late to set aside winter feed (this was not a common practice at the time) so the animals would have to fend for themselves. A snowstorm lasted until October 15 and was followed by a mild thaw that only softened the snow allowing for a hard crust to form on the surface.²⁶ With respect to the weather, the winter of 1882/1883 was strikingly similar to that of 1886/1887. Making matters worse was a change in range managers. Frank White was called to replace Walker. White was an experienced railroad-man, but had little experience in the cattle industry so W.D. Kerfoot, who had experience in Montana, came north to advise him. A poor range combined with an inexperienced manager set the stage for a costly winter. The problems of the first two winters on the Cochrane Ranch were as much managerial as they were environmental. Changing management after two hard winters meant that the lessons that should have been learned were not. As a consequence, the Cochrane was slow to make any changes to the Texas system.

²⁵ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 152.

²⁶ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 152.

The condition of the Cochrane range and cattle was telegraphed to the managers. The absent managers told White to hold the cattle where they were despite good grass being available at Blackfoot Crossing and the Little Bow. As a consequence, the work that should have went toward moving cattle to where they could find food was wasted keeping them where they were. According to L.V. Kelly “The work of keeping the stock on the Cochrane range was a gigantic one, and White found it necessary to establish camps of cowboys at Calgary...their only duties being to turn back the Cochrane stock...the number of suffering animals dwindling visibly.”²⁷ The suffering of the Cochrane cattle, especially when observed against the other ranches managing to winter their animals successfully, was a well-known travesty. In January “A representative of the Oxley Cattle Company, now at Fort Benton, reports severe weather in the vicinity of Fort McLeod....it is believed that the entire band of cattle purchased by the Cochrane Cattle Company...last fall will be lost...”²⁸ Eventually it was reported that the Cochrane herd was “obliged to drive their cattle southward from Calgary district to Fort McLeod, where, owing to the Pacific coast breeze, the climate is milder.”²⁹

By the end of February reports of cattle deaths were common in newspapers all over Montana but the focus was on the Cochrane Rancho, likely due to its size and prominence. *The River Press* reported that cattle around Fort McLeod had fared well. However, the news from the Bow River country was much more discouraging, the losses “are not only confirmed, but in fact magnified.”³⁰ Specifically, they reported that “...nearly all the stock in the vicinity of Fort Calgary is dead, both cattle and horses, and that out of 11,000 head, the Cochrane Ranch

²⁷ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 152.

²⁸ *The Dillon Tribune*, January 27, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

²⁹ *Helena Weekly Herald*, February 1, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

³⁰ *The River Press*, February 28, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

company will not have to exceed 4,000 in the spring.”³¹ An extensive and expensive winter loss was not unheard of on the Montana and Alberta grasslands. In 1881, 5,000 cattle died along the Tongue River in Montana. However, what made this disaster so striking and suggestive that the culprit was a fundamental misunderstanding of the environment was that other ranches in the area did not have exceptional losses. For example, the cattle and horses owned by the Oxley Ranch are said to “have wintered well, as has most stock in that vicinity.”³² The slow start for the Cochrane reaching a temporary equilibrium was directly connected to their use of the Texas system. The winter losses were not as bad as reported, yet they were clearly an unnecessary result of misunderstanding the environment.

In March, reports began to filter in suggesting that the losses for the Cochrane cattle were not nearly as severe as had been believed. For example, *The River Press* reported that “Parties from the north say that the cattle losses in that country are not as heavy as reported; that the Cochrane company have lost about a thousand head out of their herd of some fifteen thousand, and this mostly from the Poindexter and Orr band which were driven in last fall.”³³ The significance of this event, therefore, was not how many cattle were killed during the winter but where they were located on the vast Cochrane range. These losses, and the lack of losses felt by ranches south of Cochrane, indicated that in order to better adapt to the Alberta climate cattle had to move south. Ironically, the severity of the losses put the Cochrane ahead of the curve when it came to learning about their environment. After the managerial problems were solved they seem to have taken stock of their losses and decided to change.

³¹ *The River Press*, February 28, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

³² *The River Press*, February 28, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

³³ *The River Press*, March 14, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

A Sheep in Cow's Clothing

The fact that the thousands of cattle lost were all localized on a northern part of the range suggested to Cochrane that he should diversify his stock in order to get the best land-use possible. In March he wrote to the Minister of the Interior:

On behalf of the Cochrane Ranche Company (Limited) I have the honor to request your consent in writing to the said company being permitted to graze sheep within the track of land now held by them under lease from you for grazing purposes. The experience gained by the company during the last year shows that the said track is too far north for the safe and profitable grazing of cattle and that it is better adapted for a hardier animal like the sheep. The objections which have hitherto been raised to sheep occupying cattle grazing lands do not hold good for it has been found in Montana where large flocks of sheep graze in cattle lands, that the damage anticipated by your department does not occur. The manner of herding known as "close herding" enables the sheep to be kept within proper bounds.³⁴

The acting Minister of the Interior responded "It is certain that cattle and sheep crossover range often, the same ground without great detriment to cattle." Furthermore, he wrote that "I would therefore respectfully suggest that permission be given to those who hold leases of grazing lands laying west of the 5th Principal Meridian and north of the 51st Parallel to stock their ranges with sheep. I believe relaxation of the 7th condition of the grazing lease as far as it is applicable to the District Referenced to and to some other Sections which might be extended would be for that favorable advantage."³⁵ The shift to sheep raising as an environmental strategy made sense as they are better suited to cold weather than cattle. Matthew Cochrane was already experienced in sheep raising and it was common to see advertisements for his pure bred sheep in Montana newspapers. The lease system also favored sheep in Alberta, more so than in Montana. Montana cattle ranchers were hostile to sheep because the public land system put both grazers on the same

³⁴ Letter, Matthew Cochrane to the Minister of the Interior, March 20, 1883, M1303, Cochrane Ranche Company Ltd. Fonds 1882-1892, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

³⁵ Letter, Acting Minister of the Interior to Matthew Cochrane, March 21, 1883, M1303, Cochrane Ranche Company Ltd. Fonds 1882-1892, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

pasture. For Cochrane, the lease was his and he could put whatever grazer he chose on the grass. The addition of sheep on the northern range indicated that the Cochrane operation had gained a better understanding of its limitations. Cochrane's conversation with "Kootenai" Brown would likely go much differently in 1883.

The shift to sheep for the northern range was a significant move for Cochrane; however, he had not given up on cattle. The problem was Cochrane needed more land in Southern Alberta. To do so, Cochrane had to again get around the regulation limiting cattle grazers to 100,000 acres. Edward Brooks, an acquaintance of Cochrane, applied for and received a 33,000 acre lease in southern Alberta in 1882. The lease was granted to the Eastern Townships Rancho Company. Adjoining this lease was the Rocky Mountain Cattle Company belonging to Charles Colby. In March 1883, the leases held by Colby and Brooks were assigned to Cochrane. A third lease, held by Gagne, Pratt and Company, was assigned to James Cochrane. As a result, the Cochrane Rancho controlled roughly 170,000 acres of land, with extensive grazing land near Fort MacLeod, the Peigan reserve, and the Waterton and Belly rivers.³⁶ With the government stipulating that a lease had to have one cow per 10 acres, Cochrane could import thousands of additional cattle.

The move to control more land in the south fits with the changing perception of the Alberta environment. In *The River Press* an article from the *Fort MacLeod Gazette* was reprinted stating:

What we have always upheld and the past winter has proved, is that the choice winter range for cattle is limited to about 70 miles all around MacLeod. Reports from the Cochrane ranch on Bow River tell of severe losses, and throughout the northern country stock has suffered to a great extent. What do we see on all the ranges about this section? Comparatively little loss, and now cattle, after being out all winter, are in splendid

³⁶ Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 73.

condition, and little or no snow here all winter, when it has been two or three feet deep in other sections.³⁷

The move by Cochrane and the newspaper articles singling out the southern part of Alberta as being the only area suitable for cattle are significant to how the Cochrane ranch would adapt to their environment. From 1883 forward, the ranch would be split north and south, essentially along climate lines.

The Split Operation

Organizing a stock operation split north and south required Cochrane to divide his managers. W.D. Kerfoot, who had joined the ranch when Walker left, was to remain at Big Hill to manage the sheep ranches' affairs. White was moved south to run the cattle operation and was assisted by foreman Jim Dunlap. Considering the ample room that the Cochrane ranch now had their herd of roughly 12,000 cattle was divided in half at Big Hill and sent south to graze.³⁸ From a carrying capacity perspective Cochrane was well under what the government recommended. Cochrane's decision to move his cattle was noteworthy enough to be mentioned in *The Benton Weekly Record*. In the short blurb they noted "We understand that the Cochrane ranch company are moving their winter range south on account of the severity of the weather."³⁹ The following two winters were relatively mild and the cattle did well. The temporary equilibrium using the Texas system that had eluded Cochrane was finally reached on the new range.

While the cattle in the south were set to do well for the first time since the ranch began, the transition to sheep on the northern ranges still needed to be enacted. In May, 1883 Cochrane sent a letter to the Minister of the Interior explaining:

³⁷ *The River Press*, April 11, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

³⁸ Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 74.

³⁹ *The Benton Weekly Record*, May 26, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

The past winter has been a particularly severe one on our cattle and the losses sustained by the company at this cause have been so enormous that if they were to become actually known to the public a very serious blow would be dealt to stock raising in the north west and much injury would result to the western country generally...in the north west...cattle ranching has so far been a heavy loss to us. It is respectfully submitted that this company having complied with all government regulations and gone to enormous expenditures in stocking their lands, the government should deal with it more liberally than with the companies which having obtained similar leases, have merely paid the annual rates and waited to ascertain the experience of others before stocking their lands. The operations of the company are much restricted and hampered by reason of the delay and consequent uncertainty in the grant being made and I would again most respectfully urge that the grant be made forthwith.⁴⁰

What Cochrane's letter is referring to is the right to graze sheep on a lease that was restricted to cattle and that it was a lack of experience with the environment that led to their stock losses.

There was far too much money invested to simply abandon the land and Cochrane was convinced that sheep were the stock to turn a profit. Ironically, the lands being restricted to cattle exclusively were partly the result of lobbying done by Cochrane in the years leading up to the establishment of his ranch. Considering this fact Cochrane's conversion was significant. In less than two years Cochrane gained a far more nuanced understanding of the Alberta grasslands and was doing all in his power to adapt his ranching methods.

Cochrane was also looking for additional ways to diversify his company to off-set some of the losses over the last two winters. In October 1883, *The River Press* reported, "We learn from J.B. Smith that J.J. Healy and party's claims are in the Castle Mountains. They claim to have ledges seventy and eighty feet wide, carrying copper-stained rock which they think will assay from 50-200 ounces in silver. The Cochrane ranche company has recently purchased a three-eighths interest in McLaughlin's three claims, in that region for \$3,600. They are reported to be very rich in silver and copper...From all reports it would seem that the Healy party have for

⁴⁰ Matthew Cochrane to the Minister of the Interior, May 8, 1883, M1303, Cochrane Ranche Company Ltd. Fonds 1882-1892, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

a verity struck it rich.”⁴¹ The claim was a relatively small investment, especially when put against the investments of Conrad Kohrs; however, it indicated that Cochrane was a savvy businessman who wanted to maintain his balance sheet against the uncertainty of stock raising. Other ranchers in Alberta, especially Alfred Cross, would follow this example.

In 1884 the question of stocking sheep north of the Bow River had gained notoriety. The opposition to Cochrane’s plan was strong from other ranchers in the area and from the Southern Stock Growers Association. A petition was sent to maintain the existing ban. The Southern Stock Growers petition, from September 29, 1884, argued that “sheep not be allowed to graze within a certain defined section of the North West Territories” and “another petition signed by 124 residents and settlers on Sheep Creek and High River, against any order prohibiting the importation of sheep or other stock in the Electoral District of Calgary and the country lying East, West, and North of it.”⁴² The order-in-council, despite containing two different petitions calling for a ban on sheep, was significant in that it defined the northern limits for cattle at High River. As a result, “The Minister therefore recommends that an Order of his Excellency in Council be made defining the District in which sheep shall not be allowed to graze.”⁴³ A subsequent Order defined the area where sheep were allowed to graze as “...that Section of the North West Territories, bounded as follows: on the south by the International Boundary Line, on the West by the Summit of the Rocky Mountains, on the North by the High River and its North Fork to the Bow River, thence along the Bow River to the Eastern boundary of the Provisional

⁴¹ *The River Press*, October 3, 1883, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁴² Order in Council, Minister of the Interior, 1884-1903, Sheep Ranching, North West Territories, RG2, Privy Council Office, Series A-1-a. <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/orders-council/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=29333>

⁴³ Order in Council, Minister of the Interior, 1884-1903. <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/orders-council/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=29333>

District of Alberta and on the East by said Eastern boundary.”⁴⁴ The petition banning sheep in the south made sense. While there was no question of public land, sheep and cattle would be grazing the same area, something that cattle ranchers would not have wanted. However, from Cochrane’s perspective, thousands of his cattle had died on his northern lease and he needed a grazer that could survive a cold winter.



Figure 4. Order in Council 1884-1904, RG2, Privy Council Office, Series A-1-a

The Order in Council was an important victory for the Cochrane ranch as their northern territory along the Bow River was within the area set aside for sheep. Furthermore, this Order in Council,

⁴⁴ Order in Council, Minister of the Interior, 1884-1904, Sheep Ranching, North West Territories, RG2, Privy Council Office, Series A-1-a. <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/orders-council/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=29335>

whether the government admitted it or not, was evidence that the booster literature for cattle ranching in Alberta was fundamentally misleading.

In February 1884, the Cochrane directors met to consider transferring the Bow River lease to a new company so as to remain within the 100,000 acre limit set by the Canadian government. To that end the Bow River lease was sold, with all improvements, to the British American Rancho Company for \$55,000.⁴⁵ Cochrane was not left out of the new company as he held 300 of the 2000 shares. The 1885 report for the Deputy Minister of the Interior showed that the Cochrane Ranch Co. imported 7000 sheep, more than all other ranchers combined.⁴⁶ *The River Press* noted that Cochrane "...has purchased 8,000 sheep in Montana for his ranches, and I trust that his example will be followed by others, for the more I see of the country, the more I am convinced that it is admirably adapted for sheep raising."⁴⁷ The sheep destined for the Bow River range were driven from Montana slowly and despite arriving during a blizzard were said to have been in fine condition. The winter of 1884/1885 was a good one for sheep and all the stock pulled through the weather well.⁴⁸ However, that spring there was a late storm that resulted in many sheep escaping their pens and drowning in a nearby swamp. During the summer, a prairie fire trapped and killed an additional four hundred.⁴⁹ Adding insult to injury was a low price for wool due to Australian producers flooding the market. For Cochrane specifically "Owing to some of the sheep having been singed in an incendiary fire...the average weight of fleeces will

⁴⁵ Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 76.

⁴⁶ Report for the Deputy Minister of the Interior, March 12, 1885, M1303, Cochrane Rancho Company Ltd. Fonds 1881-1892, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

⁴⁷ *The River Press*, September 10, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁴⁸ Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 76.

⁴⁹ Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 76.

only come up to 6 or 6 ½ pounds, although the majority are up to 7 pounds.”⁵⁰ The setbacks were costly for the British American Rancho Company, but importantly, they were not due to a fundamental misunderstanding of the environment. A more nuanced understanding of the environment would not have been much comfort for investors. It was, however, significant that Cochrane understood some of the limitations of his environment and adapted by switching to sheep on the northern part of his range.

Despite the unfortunate spring drownings and summer fires it seemed that Cochrane was correct in judging that sheep were better suited to his northwest range. Furthermore, the article from *The River Post* and the evolving orders-in-council allowing for sheep suggest that the overall impression of the northwest was becoming increasingly nuanced. Alberta was on the cusp of both a drought and harsh winter in 1886/1887 and understanding the limitations of the range was essential to pulling through.

The Cochrane Rancho on the Cusp of the “Hard Winter”

Winter in 1884/1885 was described by the *MacLeod Gazette* as “many times more severe than last winter, in fact it would be difficult to imagine a more severe one in this country.” However, “Far from any serious results, we gather from all quarters that cattle are about in as good a fix as they usually are this season of the year, and in some cases better. Among pilgrim cattle and cows with big calves, the loss will be most marked, as it is every winter, but not enough to distinguish it from any other.”⁵¹ In this respect the 1884/1885 winter in Alberta was identical as in Montana. Both were severe yet cattle pulled through well. However, there was one

⁵⁰ *Calgary Herald*, July 1, 1884.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁵¹ *The River Press*, February 18, 1885. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

key difference; the article goes on to mention “If cattle will live through such a winter as we have been experiencing, without the cow business being paralyzed, cattlemen can feel pretty secure in their investments for the stock will stand any winter that is likely to come. This winter paints a moral. Plenty of hay should be put up, so that poor and weak can be cared for through such weather.”⁵² Prior to this point neither the newspapers nor had the Cochrane managers specifically mentioned the need for hay during the winter. However, based on the newspaper information, it seems that ranches located in the southern portion of Alberta were setting aside feed for the winter. Furthermore, the losses reported in the *MacLeod Gazette* for the Cochrane ranch were “...about thirty calves and five cows. In a band of several thousand cattle, this is really not worth mentioning, except as an instance of the present satisfactory condition of the cattle.”⁵³ Considering the losses suffered in previous years the Cochrane ranch had learned from their experience and had a far more accurate understanding of their environment. To this end, on February 25, 1885 the Cochrane ranch released their annual statement showing sales of “\$154,000, paying a dividend for the year of 10 per cent (\$80,000) to stock holders.”⁵⁴

In the summer of 1885 the Cochrane ranch erected a wire fence around their entire range. The reason for the fence was a noticeable deterioration in cattle due to uncontrolled breeding. This was especially costly as the Cochrane had imported several high quality breeding bulls at the start of their operation. Therefore, the fence was less about keeping the Cochrane cattle in and more about keeping the neighboring cattle out.⁵⁵ This was an early recognition of one of the massive failures of the Texas system. When cattle are left to their own devices it was impossible

⁵² *The River Press*, February 18, 1885. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁵³ *The River Press*, March 11, 1885. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁵⁴ *The River Press*, February 25, 1885. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁵⁵ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 190.

to control breeding. Cochrane's goal in 1881 was to create a breed that was well suited to Alberta and having his herd deteriorate in this way must have been a frustrating learning experience. *The River Press* wrote that "They [the Cochrane Rancho] have also during the last 12 months erected and paid for over 100 miles of wire fence" in their short article dealing with the profits made that year.⁵⁶ The Cochrane ranch was actively improving the infrastructure on their range for the purpose of maintaining their herd's quality against the poor quality of the neighbour's stock. A cow or steer's quality maintained by a fence will bring a good price, but based on the winter of 1881 it was also a significant factor in the animal's ability to survive inclement weather. However, as L.V. Kelly put it "...this Cochrane fence experienced a hard though brief existence, lasting about as long as a snowbank would remain on the streets of Honolulu..."⁵⁷ Every cowboy with the tools at hand would cut the wire if they were close enough. It was not long before the fence was utterly useless; however, "The fence posts made splendid fuel in the timberless [sic] land."⁵⁸

The two good winters experienced by the Cochrane Rancho came to an end in 1885/1886, despite having moved their herds south. The season started off poorly when, in November, prairie fires had engulfed the grasslands around Fort MacLeod and "...were threatening the winter ranges of both the Walrond and Cochrane ranch companies."⁵⁹ The problem was not the grazing areas generally, good grass could still be found. However, the Kootenay range where the cattle were wintering saw far more snow than anywhere else. When the snow piled up the cattle could not find any grass and the drifts were preventing them from moving to where they could

⁵⁶ *The River Press*, February 25, 1885. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁵⁷ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 190.

⁵⁸ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 190.

⁵⁹ *The River Press*, November 4, 1885. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

find food. What is perhaps most unfortunate was that the Cochrane cowboys did not have any winter feed, likely due to the prairie fires late in the season. The situation was dire and it seemed as though all of the gains from previous year were going to be wiped out.⁶⁰ As chance would have it Frank Strong, an employee of the I.G. Baker firm, was able to drive five hundred horses “...urged by whip and spur and vociferation...”⁶¹ through the drifts to the Cochrane cattle. As a result of the horse’s effort, a path was cut through the snow allowing the stock to find a clear pasture on which to graze. For his effort Strong was paid one thousand dollars.⁶² Despite the flirtation with disaster the Cochrane herd made through that winter.

Duncan McEachran Grows the Walrond Ranch

Despite having received only 3,125 cattle from Montana in 1883, McEachran was pleased enough with the sale to return in 1884 to order to purchase additional stock. *The Daily Enterprise* and the *River Press* wrote that:

Mr. C.E. Conrad returned Wednesday from Chestnut, where he had been on business connected with the transfer and delivery of the Swett herd of cattle to the Walrond Ranche Company...the cattle are now on this side of the river and on their way to the ranch of the Walrond Company near Fort Macleod. Contrary to the usual order in such transactions, the herd overran Mr. Swett’s estimate, there being in his band 3,267 head. The Walrond Company also purchased the herd of Mr. A.J. Samuel, of this city, on the same range, which numbered 380 head—making the total number received by the Walrond Company, 3,467. The Canadian company had to give up something like \$120,000 clean cash for these cattle.⁶³

This stock, along with thirty-six horses, crossed the Canadian border and were reported to the Minister of the Interior on August 20, 1884.⁶⁴ The timing of the delivery was important to

⁶⁰ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 191.

⁶¹ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 191.

⁶² Kelly, *The Range Men*, 191.

⁶³ *The River Press*, July 23. 1884, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁶⁴ Report for the Deputy Minister of the Interior, March 12, 1885, GMA, Cochrane Ranche Company Ltd. Fonds 1882-1892.

McEachran because, due to his experience with the Cochrane Ranch in 1883, he was well aware of the risks of not getting cattle onto their pasture early in the season.

Two experienced range managers who had trailed up with the first cattle delivery in 1883, William Bell and Jim Patterson, were on hand to take possession of the herds. It was likely that Patterson came to the ranch at the recommendation of T.C. Power. Patterson was a resident of Waco, Texas before he was the Walrond's first foreman. Bell was roped into handling the Walrond books, making him responsible for reporting the financial gains and losses to McEachran, who resided most of the year in Montreal. A final member was George W. Frields (Doc) from Fort Benton. Frields, a well-known cattleman who raised cattle in Montana while working for the Walrond, was the first on-site general manager.⁶⁵ With respect to how the ranch was run the addition of these men was significant. They were all accustomed to the Texas system, especially Patterson who was a veteran of the Chisholm Trail.

In 1884, the Walrond was a lean operation. The vast majority of the cattle had to fend for themselves on the open grasslands; this also entailed a branding operation so that the Walrond cattle could be identified and then sold or used in a beef contract. The need to brand cattle required rudimentary infrastructure consisting of corrals, chutes, housing, and squeezes, all of which were constructed in earliest years of the ranch. For McEachran, more advanced infrastructure was not considered necessary at the time and the Walrond cattle were turned out to grass in the late summer.

The autumn that year was uneventful; however, in the winter of 1884 the Macleod *Gazette* noted that McEachran came out to the Walrond during, "one of the most severe spells of

⁶⁵ C.W. Buchannan, "History of the Walrond Cattle Rancho Ltd," *Canadian Cattlemen* (1946): 262.

cold weather ever experienced in the district.”⁶⁶ The cattle seem to have gotten through the winter well as there was no report of loss of stock. However, the article also noted an environmental problem that would become increasingly evident, predators. The 1884 *Gazette* article was one of the earliest reports of “Coyotes and wolves literally swarming on some of the ranges.”⁶⁷ From an environmental perspective, cattle dying from natural causes, the year was a success and the Walrond was able to secure government contracts for the following year. For McEachran, who was already an enthusiastic for the prospects of the range cattle industry, this reinforced the booster representations and further buoyed his confidence in the Canadian beef trade.

After importing roughly 10,000 cattle from Montana, McEachran and Cochrane began agitating for the establishment of a Canadian quarantine line for American cattle to stop the spread of pleuro-pneumonia, despite the fact there was no outbreak. In an August interview with the *Montreal Gazette* McEachran stated, “How then comes it that pleuro-pneumonia has been allowed to make its slow but certain progress westward? Simply this—gigantic railroads have at an enormous cost in money covered the United States as an iron network, and in many instances the bulk of their earning is derived from the livestock trade.”⁶⁸ McEachran went on to note that American stock raisers had been unable to control the shipping of stock, possibly diseased, and that “...when the west get awakened to a sense of their danger they will bring such influence to bear that no government can stand in opposition to their wishes.”⁶⁹ It has been noted that Montana stock raisers were engaged in a similar fight with Texas cattle and overstocking, as

⁶⁶ *The River Press*, January 14, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁶⁷ *The River Press*, January 14, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁶⁸ *Montreal Gazette*, August 8, 1884. <http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/>

⁶⁹ *The River Press*, October 22, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

much as disease, was the likely motive. For McEachran, the motives were likely the same, with the additional anxiety over securing government contracts and protecting the privileged place for Canadian cattle with Britain.

The fact that McEachran had just spend over \$200,000 stocking his range with Montana cattle and was now fighting to close the border was not lost on Montana residents. McEachran was accused of having an ulterior motive. *The River Press*, published in Fort Benton, argued that:

About a month ago he (McEachran) did not seem the least bit worried about “the introduction of diseased cattle from the United States into the Northwest Territory” but now that his 4000 head of fine Montana stock are on the other side of the line the doctor seems to be possessed of a holy dread of pleuro-pneumonia and the various ills to which the cow is heir! This passage is strange. The Doctor knows as well as anybody on earth that the cattle from Montana are free from diseases of all kinds, and have always been so, while the introduction of contagious diseases is as remote as possible. Can it be that Dr. McEachran, having secured for his company about ten thousand head of Montana cattle, wants to keep others from swelling their herds, so that the ranges will not soon be overstocked, and the sale of American beef cattle in the northwest territories will be prevented? There is some motive behind all of this that is not purely patriotic or in the interest of the endangered (?) cattle kings north of the line?⁷⁰

The problem for Montana ranchers was McEachran’s hypocrisy and that the borderland economic region between Montana and Alberta would be threatened. However, the Order in Council secured by McEachran in September 1884, only banned the importation of breeding stock from Illinois.⁷¹ When the order was fully published *The River Press* wrote “This is all the concession that Montana cattlemen require, and the shipment of stock by the northern and popular route can go on just the same as before.”⁷² Ultimately, the whole incident came to

⁷⁰ *The River Press*, September 10, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁷¹ Order in Council, Minister of the Interior, September 5, 1884, Pleuro Pneumonia, RG2, Privy Council Office, Series A-1-a. <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/orders-council/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=29103>

⁷² *The River Press*, October 1, 1884. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

nothing. Canadian ranchers, like McEachran and Cochrane, were not importing their breeding bulls from Illinois and the entire order-in-council was cancelled in 1887. In fact, in 1885, McEachran declared a herd of Montana cattle in Maple Creek to be "...sound as a dollar."⁷³ The idea for a quarantine echoes Stuart and Kohrs' concerns about overstocking. It was not until after a few successful seasons where a "temporary equilibrium" was reached that ranchers fully bought into the booster representations for limitless growth. It seems as though McEachran did not want to lose any of that opportunity through something as preventable as disease.

In 1885 railway infrastructure had made its way to Lethbridge, Alberta and three cars of "mares and bulls for the Walrond Ranch" were the first shipment of stock.⁷⁴ The type of bull was not recorded by either the local paper or in the Walrond records but it is likely that they were shorthorns, polled Angus or Herefords as those were the breeds McEachran, Cochrane and Cross, favored above all others. Furthermore, having the bulls arrive in Lethbridge by rail fits with the Order in Council from 1884 banning the importation of breeding stock from south of the border. An additional concern for the Walrond, along with the stagnant price of beef, was the poor natural increase of their herds, a factor that likely influenced the purchase of quality bulls. Booster representations had all but guaranteed that cattle numbers would swell to rival the bison with little to no effort on the part of the rancher. However, for the Walrond this was not the case. Patterson's annual count of calves had been a disappointment as it showed a decrease between 2,407 in 1884 to 2,253 in 1886. The fact that the decrease in calves forcing McEachran to use

⁷³ *The River Press*, October 21, 1885. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁷⁴ *The River Press*, October 21, 1883. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

Montana cattle to swell his herds may have also played a factor in the quarantine line being restricted to Illinois bulls.⁷⁵

The explanation for the decrease in calves was a combination of economics, environmental conditions and ranching methods. It should be noted that the environmental and methodological causes were discounted by McEachran until 1898. The Department of Agriculture's records for 1883/1884 and the letters exchanged between McEachran and Power regarding the Judith Cattle Co. herd show very few calves and an abundance of older stock.⁷⁶ The herd demographic, therefore, depressed the number of calves that could be born from that first large purchase. Never one to miss an opportunity, McEachran used the older cattle to fill a beef contract for the Department of Indian Affairs. Ranch accountant Bell wrote that "...one of the chief benefits the company would derive from the contract [with Indian Affairs] would be to turn them [old cattle] into money and get the herd cleaned up."⁷⁷ It was common for cattle ranchers at the time to meet their obligations for Indigenous beef contracts with the absolute worst stock.

The environmental and methodological problem with decreasing calf numbers was also tied to uncontrolled breeding and predation. Modern ranchers utilize fencing to control the interaction of their animals so that calves are born in the spring. A spring birth allows two full seasons to gain strength before the winter. However, ranchers in Alberta, including the Walrond, had imported the open range system from Texas and no such control over breeding could be

⁷⁵ Ledger, New Walrond Ranche Company Ltd Fonds 1883-1957, May, 1885, M8688, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

⁷⁶ Report for the Deputy Minister of the Interior, March 12, 1885, Cochrane Ranche Company Ltd. Fonds 1882-1892.

⁷⁷ Letter, Bell to McEachran, October 9, 1887, M8688, New Walrond Ranche Company Ltd Fonds 1883-1957, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

exerted. For example, the Cochrane experience indicated that barbwire fencing was vulnerable to anyone with wire cutters. The lack of controlled breeding on the Walrond indicated three possibilities. First, that Patterson did not think it was necessary because of his experience with the Texas system. Second, booster representations defending the concept of natural increase instilled faith in McEachran that it would, eventually, take place. Third, the loss of those calves was just part of doing business on the open plains and the Walrond would have to accept it. An additional problem for the calf count was predators. An October edition of the *Helena Weekly Herald* ran an article stating “They [wolves] have been on the increase for three or four years past...The cattle and especially the calves are the food on which the pests thrive, and it is becoming quite a serious detriment to cattle interests.”⁷⁸ That winter it was reported that some ranchers were losing up to four percent of their total stock, mostly in calves and young cattle.⁷⁹ Prior to the hard winter of 1886/1887 all of these concerns, for the most part, were ignored. Avoiding questions of breeding and predation indicate either a lack of will to succeed, total apathy to the well-being of the animals or, mostly likely, an ignorance of the environment based on years of booster representations reinforced by several years of temporary equilibrium. However, the following winter would challenge even the most ardent booster.

Alfred Cross Grows on the Eve of a Disaster

In the spring of 1885 Cross wrote a letter to his father about the quality of the grasses located in the area around Mosquito Creek. He wrote that “...the grass was green from one to three inches in length it seems to grow from the root all winter and wherever the snow disappears

⁷⁸ *Helena Weekly Herald*, October 30, 1884, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁷⁹ *The River Press*, August 11, 1885, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

the roots are green as in the middle of summer.”⁸⁰ The significance of this letter was not Cross’ eye for grass, he had been working for Cochrane since 1884 and was familiar with the area. What was important was that Cross was already cognizant of the Alberta environment before he had even started out on his own. On the third page of his letter, Cross wrote that he consulted Reverend McDougall, a long-time resident of the area, who told him that his Mosquito Creek range was “...where you could always find buffalo in the winter time when the snow was deep...”⁸¹ Asking McDougall indicates Cross knew to draw on the knowledge of longtime residents and that winter on the Alberta prairies was unpredictable.

Cross established a homestead on 160 acres of land near the Mosquito Creek which he then designated as his ranch headquarters. He then leased 22,000 acres of grassland for his 424 shorthorns at the price of two cents per acre, per year. The number of cattle on the Cross range was well under the requisite one cow for every ten acres, something that should have set up him for short and long term success, or having his lease cancelled. The first spring and summer were dedicated to constructing a sod house and a barn and the cattle were left to graze. Cross was also able to plow up five acres of native grass for crops and cut some hay for winter feed.⁸² Despite the promising start and having the foresight to construct some infrastructure and collect hay for winter feed, the 1886/1887 winter was devastating and Cross lost numerous cattle.

Spring, Summer, and Winter 1886/1887

⁸⁰ Letter, Alfred Cross to His Father, March 20, 1885, M339, Cross Family Fonds 1836-1957, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

⁸¹ Letter, Alfred Cross to His Father, March 20, 1885, M339, Cross Family Fonds 1836-1957.

⁸² Henry Klassen, “Entrepreneurship in the Canadian West: The Enterprises of A.E. Cross, 1886-1920,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1991): 317.

Despite the poor winters, long drives, and loss of stock cattle ranching on the plains of Alberta had made great strides from its inauspicious beginnings about a decade earlier. In a government report William Pearce wrote that “there were 104,000 head of cattle, 11,000 horses and 24,000 sheep on the ranches of the province south of, and including, Bow valley.”⁸³ In 1886 the number of cattle would increase by 34,000 along with a significant number of other grazers like sheep and horses. Furthermore, Pearce had not included stock belonging to the ever increasing number of homesteaders, so it is safe to assume the total number was higher than reported. The scenario on the plains of Alberta in 1886 was strikingly similar to Montana. Both had large numbers of stock, the vast majority of which was imported from more amiable climates, and both had ranches that were lacking in basic infrastructure, barns and hay that would have essential during a particularly bad winter.

The spring and summer of 1886 was dry and hot all over the Canadian and American prairies. By mid-May reports were filtering in from Texas that “The drought still continues. Three thousand head of cattle have already perished...”⁸⁴ In true booster tradition the following day the *Helena Weekly Herald* wrote “With all the eulogies of interested writers upon the superiority of Texas, California, and the corn growing States further north for raising cattle, Montana can show a better ten or twenty year record than them...and the losses by *northers* and droughts are greater than by the severe cold of our winters.”⁸⁵ However, as spring and summer progressed the drought would extend north causing problems in both Montana and Alberta.

⁸³ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 189.

⁸⁴ *The River Press*, May 19, 1886. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁸⁵ *Helena Weekly Herald*, May 20, 1886. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

In June, 1886 the *Helena Weekly Herald* was reporting on the crop losses caused by the drought in Minnesota, the Dakotas, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Nebraska.⁸⁶ The drought reached Montana mid-summer leading to reports stating “It is too late to give us a hay crop and there will be less to put up this year than ever before in Montana.”⁸⁷ The ranchers on the Canadian prairies must have been following the progress of the drought with great interest for several reasons. First, a drought in the south would result in greater demand and higher prices for their cattle. Second, they would have been concerned that Montana ranchers would move their cattle north and stress Alberta grasslands. Last, a drought in Montana would very likely extend into Alberta.

By July the first suggestions of drought could be found in Alberta newspapers. The *Lethbridge News* reported that “W. Cochrane of the Cochrane ranche, has been appointed prairie fire guardian for this district. He can compel any one to turn out to a prairie fire within five miles of home, and a heavy penalty can be inflicted on any one refusing to do so.”⁸⁸ In the same issue under the “Town and Country” section the first entry was “Rain is badly needed.”⁸⁹ One of the results of the lack of rain was a small hay crop, something that drew enough attention that it was reported “Hay is beginning to come into town. Although the crop is poor and has to be hauled quite a distance, the hay brought in so far seems to be of good quality.”⁹⁰ The conditions on the range must have been starting to alarm stockmen and locals alike as the *Lethbridge News* ran a

⁸⁶ *Helena Weekly Herald*, June 20, 1886. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁸⁷ *Helena Weekly Herald*, July 15, 1886. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁸⁸ *The Lethbridge News*, July 27, 1886.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁸⁹ *The Lethbridge News*, July 27, 1886.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁹⁰ *The Lethbridge News*, July 27, 1886.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

short article noting “An old time cowman says in 1868 no rain fell until the last of July. When it began it rained through August and September, turned off warm and dry, curing the grass, making an abundance of food, and cowmen cut hay up in November.”⁹¹ The drought had now extended far enough into the summer that conditions for a very difficult winter, even with cooperative weather, were established.

The newspapers in August were, oddly enough considering the further deteriorating conditions, quiet about the drought. In the August 6 edition of the *Lethbridge News* the only mention of grass, rain, cattle, or crops was a sentence noting that Fort Macleod would be hosting the first Agricultural Fair to be held in Southern Alberta.⁹² The following week a booster article was printed where it was noted “Our great Northwest is the finest track of land open anywhere to-day to settlers from the old world... We need have no fear of the climate once settlement really begins.”⁹³ Considering that the Agricultural Fair was coming and that Southern Alberta newspapers were unabashed booster for the cattle industry the lack of information is somewhat telling in itself.

By September the dry weather had become so significant that the number of American cattle, which had been allowed into Alberta duty free that year due to the poor conditions on the American side, had begun to alarm local ranchers. The *River Press* reported that “...Canadians have become alarmed lest their big country should soon be overstocked, and there is not much

⁹¹ *The Lethbridge News*, July 31, 1886.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁹² *The Lethbridge News*, August 6, 1886.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁹³ *The Lethbridge News*, August 11, 1886.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

danger that cattle will be admitted free again.”⁹⁴ The reason for the alarm was, American cattle were usually stocked in the Milk River country and it “...has been burnt over and most of the streams in the vicinity are dry, necessitating a drive in some instances of at least fifty miles without water.”⁹⁵ While there was often a sense of optimism in newspapers of the time, even they stopped printing booster material after September.

The dominant news subject for the month of October was the Agricultural Fair to be held over four days at Fort Macleod. The starting day of the fair, October 12 1886, coincided with the first heavy frost of the season where “the thermometer went down to 7 below zero.”⁹⁶ Despite that early frost L.V. Kelly noted that an old time rancher in the area had a different opinion about how the weather was going to unfold after such a dry and hot summer. In the *Macleod Gazette* the prognostication was “Old-time cowmen foretell a mild winter. A dry summer is always followed by a good winter. Even at that a stack of hay will not be amiss.”⁹⁷ This weather prediction was strikingly similar in form to the one printed by the *Lethbridge News* in August. Both were based on the reports of an “old-time” resident and both naively optimistic. The only prescient aspect to the prediction was that having hay on hand may not be a bad idea.

In early December 1886, it must have seemed as though the prediction from the *Macleod Gazette* was coming true because the temperatures reported in the area were all above freezing

⁹⁴ *The River Press*, October 27, 1886. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁹⁵ *The Lethbridge News*, September 8, 1886.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁹⁶ *The Lethbridge News*, October 13, 1886.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁹⁷ Kelly, *The Range Men*, 198-199.

for the week ending December 22.⁹⁸ Conditions were still quite dry, however, as a prairie fire broke out mid-December near Medicine Hat, something that was unusual so far into the winter.⁹⁹ The following week winter seized the prairies when “A heavy snowstorm visited the town on Monday night” and it would not let go for several months. In the “Town and Country” section of the January *Lethbridge News* the first three entries were: “snow everywhere”, “The roads are pretty heavy for wheeling at the moment”, and “The cry of every stockman just at present is for a chinook.”¹⁰⁰ The most significant entry, however, reported that:

The heaviest snow storm of the season struck here on Friday night last. Snow began to fall in the evening and continued steadily until morning. It was about 18 inches deep on the level. Sunday a chinook sprang up and took away a little of it, and on Monday, although no wind was blowing, the weather was mild and the water was dripping from the roofs. Monday night the wind veered around to the east and it began to freeze forming a thick crust on the snow. This will make it hard on cattle as the prairie is pretty well covered with snow and the crust on the snow prevents them from getting at the grass. We hope, however, to feel a good strong chinook blowing before they will begin to feel any ill effects from this change.¹⁰¹

The following week the entire area was hit with another severe storm that dropped enough snow to almost completely suspend all rail traffic in Alberta and force the shutdown of the local mining operations.¹⁰² A snowfall followed by a small melt and then freeze was about as bad as it could get for cattle. But, as it had not happened in recent memory, ranchers were not sure how

⁹⁸ *The Lethbridge News*, December 22, 1886.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁹⁹ *The Lethbridge News*, December 22, 1886.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

¹⁰⁰ *The Lethbridge News*, January 5, 1887.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

¹⁰¹ *The Lethbridge News*, January 5, 1887.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

¹⁰² *The Lethbridge News*, January 12, 1887.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

long it would last. Furthermore, weather events such as these were always ignored by boosters which, along with the recent arrival of most stockmen, engendered a dearth of accurate information that resulted in a general disaster.

In the week immediately following the storms “The stockman say that the cattle are getting through the winter admirably and if the weather does not get any worse than at present for a couple of weeks the loss for this cause will be small.”¹⁰³ While these reports may sound naïve, cattle had been turned out to grass in the area for over a decade without a general loss so it stands to reason that stockmen in 1886 would not have thought it possible. The weather did not improve in January; it got worse. Another snow storm followed by a small melt was reported the following week. Compounding the problem of the crusted snow was the wind had increased and all of the loose snow was beginning to form large drifts wherever it could pile up.¹⁰⁴ What was happening in Alberta was almost exactly as in Montana. It was not that the winter was bitterly cold for long stretches of time but that the snow would fall, melt and then freeze, making it impossible for the cattle to “muzzle” for food. The inability for cattle to push through a crust of snow was a key difference between cattle and bison foraging abilities.¹⁰⁵ As a consequence, what would have been a hard year for bison was a brutal one for cattle. Compounding the problem was that the poor spring and summer had decreased the hay crop significantly just when it was

¹⁰³ *The Lethbridge News*, January 19, 1887.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

¹⁰⁴ *The Lethbridge news*, January 26, 1887.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

¹⁰⁵ Allan A. Steuter and Lori Hidinger, “Comparative Ecology of Bison and Cattle on Mixed Grass Prairie,” *Great Plains Research* 9, no. 2 (1999): 331.

needed most. As a result, when the cold temperatures and storms arrived late in the season the cattle were ill equipped to survive.

In February, cattle already weakened from the difficulty of finding food, were subjected to severe cold and another round of storms. The combination of weather engendered the first general die-off in the history of Alberta stock-raising.¹⁰⁶ In the February 2, 1887 edition of the *Lethbridge News* it was reported that the temperature had plummeted to 43 below zero. Shortly after “Another snow storm stuck here on Saturday evening last and continued all day Sunday. Monday and Tuesday was very cold with a slight wind blowing and the thermometer at 31 below zero. Today is still very cold but clear and calm. The off set this weather will have on the cattle will be very serious as numbers of them have already succumbed to the cold and hunger.”¹⁰⁷ L.V. Kelly noted that cattle all over Alberta were succumbing to the weather in one way or another. Stock all over Alberta huddled together due to the cold, were unable to find food because of the snow, and unable to move because of the drifts. The degree of the die-off was such that by February 9 the report on cattle mortality was a succinct “Cattle are dying pretty fast in this vicinity at present.”¹⁰⁸

For Cochrane, McEachran and Cross, along with every other rancher on the Alberta prairies, the winter of 1886/1887 was significant. It was the first general loss of cattle in the area and was certainly a demarcation point for ranching operations generally. From this point forward, much as in Montana, hay and infrastructure were essential facets of any ranching

¹⁰⁶ There had been other local disasters, such as when Cochrane lost 1,000 head of cattle in 1883.

¹⁰⁷ *The Lethbridge News*, January 2, 1887.

<http://digital.library.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

¹⁰⁸ *The Lethbridge News*, February 9, 1887.

<http://digital.library.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

operation. For Cochrane it more or less spelled the end of his long term ranching aspirations. Despite having access to capital and thousands of acres of grass his inexperience with the environment coupled with some poor luck made staying in business more trouble than it was worth. Cross and McEachran, however, would be forced to come to terms with the limitations of the environment and the fundamental inaccuracies of booster representations of the environment. An important distinction between Cross and McEachran was that Alfred Cross was the owner of his ranch, McEachran was beholden to investors and was steeped further in the unrealistic aspirations of cattle raising in Alberta.

Chapter 7: Adapting After the Hard Winter

The winter of 1886/1887 was a demarcation point for the range cattle industry on the Alberta and Montana grasslands. From an environmental perspective the large scale die-off of cattle, in some areas up to 70%¹, undermined dominant booster representations of Montana and Alberta. The idea that there could be a series environmental events that could negatively affect such a large geographical area was considered impossible, or rare, but never mentioned before 1886/1887. Even when 5,000 Texas cattle froze to death on the Sun River range in 1881, Conrad Kohrs felt that it was a localized incident. As a consequence, when such a disaster did happen, the attitude regarding stock raising changed. The change was best summed up by Granville Stuart's claim "a business that had been fascinating to me before, suddenly became distasteful. I wanted no more of it. I never wanted to own again an animal that I could not feed and shelter."² The atmosphere engendered by this disaster emphasized recovery and adaptation. The need to adapt was not lost on the newspapers of the time. The *Great Falls Tribune*, wrote in March following the disaster, "It is well that the cattle business of the western ranges must soon be adjusted to new and more civilized conditions. At present it is barbarous to the last degree, and whole herds will continue to die of cold and starvation until the filling up of the country makes it unprofitable to waste land and live stock in the present fashion."³ Adaptation methods varied from ranch to ranch. Some downsized to a manageable herd to avoid putting too much stress on the grass. Others increased herd size but also set aside feed and shelter for winter, especially the kind of winter they now knew could happen. Many sought to improve their stock through

¹ *Bozeman Weekly Chronicle*, February 23, 1887. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

² Granville Stuart. *Forty Years on the Frontier*, 237; Osgood, *Day of the Cattlemen*, 221. It should also be noted that Stuart, true to his word, left the cattle business.

³ *Great Falls Tribune*. March 19, 1887. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

breeding programs. Some decided, the decision to mitigate all risks and became land sellers. There was no single way to adapt to the north-western plains and ranchers in Montana and Alberta would each pursue their own path. The only universal was the years following the “hard winter” were pivotal to stock raising and for the emergence of a far more nuanced perception of the environment.

The plains where so many cattle had died must have been a grim sight when cattlemen could finally get a chance to inspect their herds in February or March. Newspaper reports began to filter in that painted a sad picture for those who could not venture onto the plains. For example, the *Butte Semi-Weekly Miner* wrote that railroad workers saw “...a bunch of cattle frozen to death standing and still remaining in that position.”⁴ Just a few days later the *Bozeman Weekly Chronicle* published an editorial estimating the scope of the disaster and its causes. The scope was, to say the least, massive. The writer estimated that “...loss upon the ranges in many instances will exceed seventy percent, in others fifty, and in favorable localities, where feed shelter and water is abundant, only twenty-five percent will die, making...a loss throughout Montana of at least thirty-five percent...”⁵ With respect to the cause the writer indicated that the winter of 1886/1887 was an environmental disaster due to “Large incoming herds and rapid increase, supplemented by an unusually dry summer season, rendered the ranges dry and bare. Then came a winter of unusual severity, deep snows and howling blizzards.”⁶ These reports suggest that, even to Montana residents, the cause was predominantly environmental with overstocking exacerbating an already bad situation. Furthermore, it would be incumbent on those

⁴ *Butte Semi-Weekly Miner*. February 12, 1887. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁵ *Bozeman Weekly Chronicle*. February 23, 1887. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁶ *Bozeman Weekly Chronicle*. February 23, 1887. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

who decided to continue in the industry to adapt. Conrad Kohrs would heed this advice in the coming months and years.

In his autobiography Conrad Kohrs wrote that he learned about the break in the weather in a letter from his brother who told him a chinook had come through. Kohrs had been away suffering from ill health. When he was able to return and informed of the losses replied "...I have my health again, and that is worth more than all the cattle."⁷ However, when Stuart informed him that the branding had dropped from 3,000 to 900 he began to realize the financial severity. Kohrs, however, had no interest in getting out of the cattle industry altogether. His first task was to replace the stock he had lost.

Conrad Kohrs was successful due to his diversification of assets. His investments in mining, water, and land mitigated the financial losses he experienced during the winter of 1886/1887. However, an additional asset to his large business empire was that it allowed him access to capital. As he noted in his autobiography "One of the bright spots in the heavy losses of this season was the kindness of Mr. A.J. Davis of Butte. Hearing about my losses, he sent for me and offered me \$100,000.00 without any security...except the notes of Kohrs and Bielenberg"⁸ The following year he took advantage of the offer. While the lending of money without security seems like a poor business decision, Davis was not the only wealthy individual to make such an offer. Joseph Rosenbaum, the wealthy stock commissioner from Chicago whom Kohrs had hired in the 1870s and had made a fortune from Montana cattle, offered one million dollars to help stock raisers get their herd sizes back up and start shipping cattle out of Chicago. The money offered by Rosenbaum was also accepted by Kohrs for the purpose of rebuilding his herds,⁹ but

⁷ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 86.

⁸ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 86-87.

⁹ Gresseley, *Bankers and Cattlemen*, 168.

certainly not all cattlemen were as fortunate in their friends as Kohrs. However, that should not detract from the actions he took in the wake of the hard winter to establish a ranch that was more in line with Montana's environment.

In the spring of 1888 Kohrs began restocking in earnest. He started out in Boise, Idaho where he hired Dick Williams, who was well versed in the cattle industry, to assist him. Their travels included the Boise Valley, Payette, Ontario and then back to Idaho where animals were purchased along the way. The restocking included all ages of stock and numbered around 9,000.¹⁰ In the same year Duncan McEachran would also restock with older cattle from Ontario. The animals themselves were spread between the ranges located near Fort Benton and some were sent to the Pioneer Cattle Company further south, near Bowdoin. Despite all of the difficulty facing the Montana cattle industry that year Kohrs was still able to ship roughly 1,000 head from Chicago.

Among the animals purchased in 1888 were shorthorn breeding bulls. The *Great Falls Tribune* wrote that "Conrad Kohrs, of Deer Lodge, the heaviest shorthorn breeder in the territory, has on his hands several bulls for which he paid \$1,000 per head."¹¹ The purchase reflected Kohrs' determination to improve his stock as a way to adapt to the plains environment. In order to do so he purchased Texas cattle¹², known for the heartiness but not their cold tolerance, and bred them with shorthorns that were a better eating cow and more suited to a cooler climate. In later years Kohrs would make the switch from shorthorns to Hereford. The practice of breeding better animals, especially in the wake of the 1886/1887 winter, also shows long term planning for improvement as the new stock could not have been shipped for at least three years.

¹⁰ Kohrs. *Autobiography*, 87.

¹¹ *Great Falls Tribune*. March 21, 1888. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

¹² The quarantine had been modified allowing stock to be imported from the Texas Panhandle.

Furthermore, with respect to having stock better suited to Montana's climate, in June of 1888 Kohrs imported 5,000 animals from Oregon. Kohrs had identified the importance of having imported animals acclimated, as Oregon cattle were.¹³ Prior to 1886/1887 the information available indicated that all of the precautions now being taken by Kohrs were unnecessary. While it is true that as a long-time resident of Montana Kohrs knew better than most what Mother Nature could bring, he had never lived through such a wide-spread disaster. Therefore, the efforts exerted after 1887 to have acclimated stock indicate a far more nuanced understanding of the environment, an understanding that directly challenged the booster representations that had dominated the media for almost three decades.

Perhaps the only bright spot resulting from the cattle losses in 1887 was that the range was allowed time to recover from the drought without pressure from grazers. Kohrs noted that the winters of 1888 to 1890 were mild with little precipitation, even in the spring. He also wrote that "There was an abundance of grass on the prairie for the cattle as the range was not overstocked."¹⁴ This was a drastic departure from the previous years when up to twelve herds were all grazing together. The fact that the range seemed to be recovering was likely part of the justification behind Kohrs making a significant land purchase for his Deer Lodge operation. In total he added nearly 8,000 acres to his home ranch along with numerous improvements.¹⁵ The Deer Lodge range was located in the foot hills and therefore had better shelter from inclement weather. Protection from inclement weather at Deer Lodge was something Kohrs had noticed before 1886/1887, adding land here indicated an understanding of environmental fluctuation in

¹³ *The River Press*. June 20, 1888. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

¹⁴ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 93.

¹⁵ *Helena Independent*, March 10, 1890. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

Montana. Furthermore, the improvements themselves suggest a more controlled ranching method as opposed to the Texas system that was previously popular. The *Helena Independent* wrote:

The property surrounding the residence comprises 800 acres. This is divided into 12 fields and pastures for different graded stock. A new stable with 18 box stalls has recently been completed...Just beyond the farm Mr. Kohrs has 2,500 acres of grazing land fenced in and owns 2,500 acres down in the valley...where he keeps his shorthorns and raises hay, oats, and vegetables. Messrs. Kohrs and Bielenberg are among the cattle kings of Montana and find a profitable business in raising thoroughbred cattle and horses.¹⁶

The infrastructure to the home range at Deer Lodge indicate significant faith in the cattle industry as a whole; but also that the future for ranching in Montana was going to be tied to improved stock.

At the same time improvements were being made to the Deer Lodge operation, Kohrs was investing in mining companies. The *Helena Independent* included a special article in their September 20, 1890 edition which mentioned that Conrad Kohrs was a principal investor in the Champion Mining Company and the Lion Mining company.¹⁷ While cattle prices were generally steady and profits were available, it was not surprising that Kohrs would invest in mining as a way to hedge against the unpredictability of the cattle business. Furthermore, by 1890 Kohrs had become concerned about the presence of agricultural settlers siphoning off river water leaving less for cattle. In an interview he stated "...Montana needs a great deal more water now than it did several years ago. The many mountain valleys in which cattle roamed are now occupied by farmers, who appropriate the water for agricultural purposes."¹⁸ Despite mentioning that the cattle industry was strong in the same interview, it made sense for Kohrs to invest outside of cattle if he was concerned about pressure from farmers, especially in the river valleys.

¹⁶ *Helena Independent*, March 10, 1890. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

¹⁷ *Helena Independent*, September 20, 1890, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

¹⁸ *Helena Independent*, February 5, 1890. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

The year 1891 proved to be a profitable year for Kohrs suggesting that either the industry as a whole was turning around or that he was making the right type of changes, or both. There was still an abundance of grass despite the number of cattle in Montana actually having increased beyond what it was in 1886. Cattle numbers went from 633,716 in 1886 to 932,697 in 1891.¹⁹ The prosperity of 1891 was due to “...an abundance of grass...owing to the shortage of corn fed cattle...” What he was referring to was the increasing practice of sending cattle out of Montana to fatten on corn, something that Kohrs did not do. The stock that was shipped averaged 1585 pounds which realized a total profit of \$290,000.00.²⁰

The success found in the spring, however, was tempered by a poor fall market and a severe winter that year. Kohrs wrote that the market was so bad during the fall they had received more for their cattle sold in the spring, without the benefit of a season fattening. The winter took its toll as well. Kohrs, as was usual for the business, had acquired new stock that year but “...of the yearlings shipped in we lost fifty percent.”²¹ The aggregate loss of the stock would total 33%.²² Losing more yearlings to a severe winter suggests that perhaps even more needed to be done. *The New Northwest* reported that Kohrs (and others) advised newcomers shipping Texas cattle to Montana in the fall of 1892 to “...stop their drive on the Little Missouri...” instead of pushing them the additional two hundred miles to their destination. The reason for stopping them early was to give them a chance to recover some weight and, significantly, to acclimate to the Montana environment. The advice was not heeded however, and the cattle, thin, tired, and not acclimated, were caught by “an early and hard winter and over 65 percent of them lost...”²³ That

¹⁹ Granville Stuart, *Montana as it is*, 23.

²⁰ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 93.

²¹ Kohrs, *Autobiography*, 93.

²² *The Helena Independent*. February, 24, 1893. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

²³ *The New Northwest*, June 2 17, 1893, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

winter Kohrs wrote “experience has taught me to be careful as hard winters hardly run farther apart than five years...”²⁴

The loss of stock in 1892/1893 and Kohrs’ mild reaction to it suggests that, despite making changes, he had accepted that the climate was not within his control and occasional heavy losses were a cost of doing business. However, what he could control, he did. At the Deer Lodge range where he had five Hereford bulls and Shorthorn bulls he began, inadvertently, to cross breed.²⁵ The interbreeding occurred because by the 1890s the individual herds at Deer Lodge had grown too large and the only solution was to mix the herds together; what resulted was a happy accident. Herefords, recognized by their white face, were especially efficient at adding weight as they had been initially bred as draft animals. Furthermore, they were especially tolerant to inclement weather and were “...an early maturing animal” that was prized for “Its ability to forage in the most hostile environments, out wintering in the foothills of the Rockies...” Lastly, despite their hardiness and size Herefords were quite docile.²⁶ The resulting cross bred animals were large, hardy, and relatively easy to handle. While this was an accident, the premise that improvement of stock was important was still significant and indicated a concerted effort to tailor Montana cattle to Montana weather.

Despite the losses and the expense of restocking, Kohrs continued to ship cattle both in and out of Montana. However, as in 1887, he was forced to rely on outside capital. The money was lent to him on the expectation of cattle sales. In *Bankers and Cattlemen*, Greene Gressley argued that the 1890s was a period of borrowed capital for the range cattle industry that was

²⁴ Letterpress, Conrad Kohrs, December 1892, M73 Book A 163-164, Conrad Kohrs Papers 1864-1904, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

²⁵ *The New Northwest*, May 19, 1882. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

²⁶ Joan E. Grundy, “The Hereford Bull: His Contribution to New World and Domestic Beef Supplies,” *The Agricultural History Review* 50, no.1 (2002): 79.

frustrating for cattlemen who were waiting for another boom.²⁷ An aspect of the frustration ignored by Gressley was that rancher's expectations were tied to booster representations and could never really be achieved. Kohrs, however, was successful in the 1890s despite occasionally relying on borrowed money. Kohrs' acceptance that hard winters were a part of doing business and that he would have to adapt to them altered his expectations. The hard-winter and the poor years at the start of the 1890s did not stop Kohrs from supplying the Chicago stockyards.

By the mid-1890s booster representations, especially for northern Montana, had completely changed their tone and level of expectation for returns, effort and environment. Printed in the *Anaconda Standard* was an 1894 interview with Editor McLaughlin, a "recognized authority" on the subject of cattle ranching in northern Montana. He stated that "Under the most favorable circumstances the results are not in proportion to the money invested and the labor performed. About every fourth year a hard winter reduces the herds almost to the point of obliterating the natural increase of the other three seasons. Drouthy [sic] seasons and prairie fires often place the herds in peril of starvation. Wolves claim their tribute to the extent of 25 per cent annually of the calves branded."²⁸ While this quotation does its utmost to refute any and all booster representations of the environment for some the main culprit was still overcrowding. McLaughlin noted that:

But perhaps the greatest menace to the cattle industry arises from overcrowding the range. This, it is needless to say, is brought about chiefly by outside owners driving in from other ranges with which they have become dissatisfied. To stigmatize such a course as shortsighted is not sufficiently denunciatory. While it is true that the to the general range remains in the government, it has always been recognized among cattle owners, as a matter of courtesy and moral right, that after a range has become fairly well stocked, it

²⁷ Gressley, *Bankers and Cattlemen*, 145.

²⁸ *Anaconda Standard*, October 18, 1894. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

belongs to the first occupants, who have invested their means and established their homes.²⁹

This quotation could not be further from those just a decade earlier that spoke of limitless free grass and unlimited potential for natural increase of the herds. It is hardly surprising then, that Kohrs would have recognized the environmental reality of Montana and altered his ranching methods from the Texas system to something more suited to the climate.

An aspect of Kohrs' continued success, along with having established good credit with bankers, was that he never gave up control of his company. This stands in contrast with several other large cattle operations that, because of their financial insecurity, were forced to give up control to commission firms. Commission firms specified the age of the cattle and the price was determined by the market; however, as Kohrs had control he was able to determine the type of cattle he wished to graze on either his land or on the public domain. Gene Gressley notes that most cattle ranches "were not run as business," the fact that Kohrs was an accomplished businessman was certainly an advantage.³⁰ The matter of control may seem small; however, the winters of 1886/1887 and 1892/1893 had demonstrated that certain cattle were better adapted to the environment than others. As a consequence, Kohrs concentrated his efforts on the breeds that he, through years of experience, knew were better suited to Montana's climate.

By the mid-1880s the idea of the feeder system, a precursor to modern feed lots, came to dominate the industry.³¹ As Kohrs had noticed, this was the partially the reason that public land was not as crowded. In the feeder system, worked where steers were shipped to mid-western feed lots in the fall, fattened on corn all winter, then sold to stockyards for slaughter or shipping.

²⁹ *Anaconda Standard*, May 11, 1894. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

³⁰ Gene M. Gressley, "The American Cattle Trust: A Study in Protest," *Pacific Historical Review* 30, no. 1 (1961): 61-77; Gressley, *Bakers and Cattlemen*, 248.

³¹ Elofson, *So Far and Yet so Close*, 154.

William Cronon argued that through this system cattle became an interstate commodity. They were born in one place, grew in another, fattened in a final place and then shipped all over the country.³² Due to Kohrs maintaining control over his operation he was not forced into this ranching methodology as it was detrimental to him. Cattle entering the feeder system were sold before they were at their heaviest. Had Kohrs been forced to participate in this system he would have lost money with every animal. It was far more economical for him to maintain his herds through the winter as best he could and then ship his animals. Again, this seems a small matter, but in an industry that had been dealt several heavy blows, his decision to adapt his practice to the environment, and not sell into the feeder system, showed that he had learned from the hard winter(s).

By the 1890s Kohrs, through several years of trial and error, had become one of the finest breeders of cattle in Montana. In 1897 the number of Hereford calves he sold increased dramatically. The increase indicated that Kohrs was adapting his ranching practice to sell more cows and calves and fewer steers. The reason for this transition was simply a recognition of a changing industry within an environment that was clearly not as hospitable as once believed and that Herefords were a cold tolerant animal. The switch to selling more cows and calves coincided with several large land purchases around Deer Lodge and indicated a better understanding of the Montana environment. Kohrs could avoid the dangers of winter kill on both animals and predation by wolves on calves. Furthermore, by increasing the size of his Deer Lodge operation, which was in an intermountain valley and small enough to easily feed and shelter animals from

³² Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 207-225.

inclement weather, Kohrs saw that certain animals were better grazed at home than left to their own devices on public land.

Further reinforcing Kohrs recognition of the environment and his waning reliance on public land was the increased supervision of livestock at Deer Lodge and the cultivation of non-native crops. Starting in 1893, one year after the second hard winter, Kohrs' operation ordered a ton of Timothy seed.³³ This grass species was common in northern Europe but not common in Montana. With respect to cattle feed, Timothy grass is high in fiber and protein and is actually better when cut late in the season.³⁴ In addition to the Timothy seed, Kohrs purchased 10 tons of bran, shorts and clover seed.³⁵ Coming so quickly on the heels of the 1892 winter this shift to growing ample crops and selling cows and calves indicated a far more nuanced understanding of the Montana environment and the cattle industry. While never explicitly saying so, many of these changes, costly as they were, tacitly suggest that for the most part Kohrs was no longer influenced by booster representations common in previous decades.

The recognition of the importance of Deer Lodge and having a more balanced ranching methodology coincided with depleting free grass and open water on the north and eastern ranges. This made the Texas system even less attractive to Kohrs. In 1899, Kohrs voiced this problem to a longtime friend and investor stating "...our range are getting to be in such shape that you can count from 20 to 25 percent on loss..."³⁶ This admission, coming in March as opposed to later

³³ Letter, Bielenberg to Matt Peterson, March 21, 1893, M73 Book B 14, Conrad Kohrs Papers 1864-1904, Montana Historical Society, Helena; Anna Fay Rosenberg, "Hard Winter Endurance: Conrad Kohrs Cattle Raising Operation, 1887-1900" (MA Thesis, University of Montana, 1996), 67.

³⁴ Thomas E. Bedell, "Nutrative Value of Forage and Diets of Sheep and Cattle from Oregon Subclover-Grass Mixtures," *Journal of Range Management* 24, no. 2 (1971), 128.

³⁵ Letter, Bielenberg to Matt Peterson, January 13, 1894, M73 Book B 14, Conrad Kohrs Papers 1864-1904; Rosenberg, "Hard Winter", 67.

³⁶ Letter, Kohrs to Rosenbaum, March 12, 1899, M73 Book 378, Conrad Kohrs Collection, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

in the summer, indicates the old ranching methods were not going to work as they had before the boom. In order to solve this problem Kohrs, once again, bought land so he would not have to rely on the public domain. Fortunately, the N-N Ranch, owned by William and Frederick Neidringhaus, was up for sale. Along with that land Kohrs acquired 14,000 acres of land through scrip.³⁷ The scrip land was controlled by the Forest Service and was intended to be set aside for homesteaders. However, Kohrs took advantage of this system by getting the land directly from homesteaders who saw an opportunity to make some fast money. Buying so much land, in both Deer Lodge and northeastern Montana, was a recognition that controlled breeding and keeping cattle fed, watered was no longer possible on public lands alone.

Historians of Montana have often regarded the hard winter of 1886/1887 as the end of the open range and for many ranchers this was true. The catastrophic losses of that winter combined with increasing predation made turning cattle loose on the plains a risky, if not foolhardy, endeavor. However, for Kohrs it was just the start of his empire. He clearly learned that the booster representations were the stuff of fantasy and that by relying on the Texas system imported from the south he was doomed to failure. His actions after 1886/1887 and then 1892/1893 indicate a far more nuanced understanding of the environment, especially its limitations. In that sense the significance of the hard winter is more the creation of historians who focused their analysis on the decline and not on the adaptation.

After the Die-Off in Canada

North of the 49th parallel significant changes were taking place in the wake of the winter of 1886/1887 as well. Despite suffering large losses and the subsequent selling of numerous

³⁷ *The Daily River*, April 23, 1900. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

assets, the Cochrane Rancho was not immediately abandoning the cattle industry. In an 1888 edition of *The River Press* it was reported that “The contracts for Indian supplies have been awarded to Hull, Trounce & Co., I.G. Baker & Co., Cochrane Rancho Co., Robert Scott and the Walrond Ranch Co.”³⁸ The caveat was that the stock had to come from Canada, something that caused Montana newspapers to speculate that Cochrane had used his political influence to secure the contract.³⁹ In September of that year W.J. Buchanan, general manager for the Bank of Montreal, engaged a tour of southern Alberta. While there, he noted that the cattle at the Cochrane Rancho “...look splendid; they have an excellent calf crop and the prospects are very good.”⁴⁰ The winter of 1888/1889 was a mild one however, the actions taken by the Cochrane Rancho suggest that they were, like all other wise stock-raisers in Alberta, taking steps to mitigate another hard winter. In an interview with the *Great Falls Leader* Cochrane noted “That the company put up last summer 500 tons of hay, but owing to the mild winter little of the same has been used for feeding stock, except to a number of weened [sic] calves.”⁴¹ The success of the year was indicated in the stock that was issued to the Blood Indian agency weighing roughly 900 pounds dressed.⁴² The simple act of putting up hay, especially a significant amount, was a strong indicator that the Cochrane Rancho was addressing the shortcomings that had been identified by the 1886/1887 winter. Furthermore, as in the developments south of the border, the act of setting aside winter feed indicates a far more nuanced interpretation of the environment that ran counter to booster material.

³⁸ *The River Press*. July 11, 1888. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

³⁹ *Great Falls Tribune*. July 25, 1888. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁴⁰ *Lethbridge News*. September 19, 1888.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁴¹ *Great Falls Tribune*, March 2, 1889. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁴² *Great Falls Tribune*, March 2, 1889. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

With the success of 1889 behind them and the additional experience gained from the winter of 1886/1887 the Cochrane Ranche began to increase their herds, despite being able to reduce them based on changes to lease regulations in 1888. In an 1890 edition of the *Great Falls Semi-Weekly Tribune* it was reported that the Cochrane Ranche had purchased 6,000 cattle from John Conrad.⁴³ The number of cattle suggests that the Cochrane Ranche intended to continue with the cattle business. Furthermore, in 1888 Mormons from Utah settled at Lee's Creek, just south of Calgary.⁴⁴ While part of their lease contained a provision for grazing land they were, at the time, mostly raising crops. Cochrane used this to his advantage and contracted them to cut hay for his ranch.⁴⁵ That December Cochrane was in Ottawa meeting with the Interior Department to discuss ranching interests in the North West.⁴⁶ With a new herd and a steady supply of hay on hand the, Cochrane Ranche would take the next step in adapting to the cattle business, shipping dressed meat in refrigerated rail cars.

In the spring of 1892 a late storm came through southern Alberta likely causing a great deal of concern for stock raisers. However, according the *Lethbridge News*, the losses on the Cochrane were nil. The explanation was "the Cochrane Ranche cattle...are favorably situated."⁴⁷ While there is no direct evidence that the Cochrane Ranche had moved their cattle to an area with better protection from storms, it seems they have done so with the general knowledge of

⁴³ *Semi-Weekly Tribune*, May 7, 1890. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁴⁴ Orders in Council, Governor General of Canada, November 26, 1888, Mormon Settlement at Lee's Creek, RG2, Privy Council Office, Series a-1-a. <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/orders-council/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=33257>

⁴⁵ Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 79.

⁴⁶ *Lethbridge News*, December 24, 1890.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁴⁷ *Lethbridge News*, May 11, 1892.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

ranchers in the area. Another bit of good news came that fall when the *Lethbridge News* reprinted a letter from the *Drover's Journal* out of Chicago that stated "There is every probability that Canadians will go into the dead meat trade next season...The Cochrane Ranche Company have already commenced operations with this end in view. The company will build large abattoirs at Calgary, and the beef will be shipped to Montreal in refrigerator cars."⁴⁸ The idea of shipping frozen meat was not new, T.C. Power had done so in the 1880s. However, that was for one shipment to fill a contract, this was an interesting adaptation to an emerging technology.

In November 1892, it was reported that Matthew Cochrane was in Ottawa arranging for the trade in dressed beef between Calgary and eastern Canada, a reinvestment similar to that of Kohrs' in Montana.⁴⁹ The winter of 1886/1887 must have caused a significant loss in capital which explains the selling of assets. However, by 1892 the Cochrane Ranche seems to have recovered financially and with the setting aside of hay and keeping their cattle in more protected areas suggests a recognition that the environment necessitated adaptation.

While the Cochrane Ranche had secured several shorthorn breeding bulls in the past, the subject of breeding better stock was not often discussed in their day-to-day correspondence or in the newspapers. However, in 1893 it was reported that "Most of the cattle are of the shorthorn type, good animals for the trade in every way. There are still a good many of the old kind, all

⁴⁸ *Lethbridge News*. November 23, 1892.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁴⁹ *Lethbridge News*, November 16, 1892.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

legs and horns, but the ranchers are getting out of them as fast as they can...”⁵⁰ While the gentleman in question was talking about cattle in a general sense, he had just purchased 1,500 animals from the Cochrane Rancho so it is safe to say that Cochrane stock had been improved. Furthermore, the stock now being wintered at Lee’s Creek, where the Mormons had been contracted to cut hay, had done well enough through the winter that it was possible to sell them in the spring. From an adaptation standpoint having adequate hay on hand was significant. It was also notable enough that an editorial remarked “Here is an item for smaller ranchers to consider. If this company can make money by feeding their beeves and selling for the spring market, why cannot other ranchers do likewise? The future will doubtless see a reformation in this part of Alberta in the ranching business.”⁵¹

With an improved stock, access to hay, and an advantageous position in the newly emerging “dead meat” trade, the Cochrane Rancho had successfully adapted much of its practice to the Alberta prairies. Furthermore, they were still engaged in shipping live cattle. In August 1894, the ranch shipped four trainloads, roughly 1,000 cattle, followed by 500 in September.⁵² In the same year the Cochrane Rancho management began looking into irrigating a large tract of their land on the Belly River. In a nod to boosterism the *Lethbridge News* noted that “This is a wise move on the part of the company, for with such backing irrigation can soon be proved to be the great key for unlocking the treasure houses of mother earth in this locality, and then once

⁵⁰ *Lethbridge News*, August 3, 1893.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁵¹ *Lethbridge News*. March 16, 1893.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁵² *Lethbridge News*. August 22, 1894 and September 19, 1894.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

unlocked we will need no immigration agents to invite people to come and enrich themselves.”⁵³

In 1895 an Order in Council to grant permission for the construction of irrigation ditches was recommended.⁵⁴

The Cochrane Ranche would continue operating as a successful cattle enterprise for the next decade, while continuously working on improving its stock and land and attaining government beef contracts. For example, in May 1894 the ranch took possession of fifty shorthorn breeding bulls and the following year they were awarded the Blood agency beef contract.⁵⁵ Over the next decade they would continue developing their land and shipping cattle east. However, between 1894 and 1905 Alberta was opening up to settlement thereby increasing the value of the Cochrane Ranche's land while simultaneously putting pressure on the day-to-day operations. The result was that the Cochrane Ranche would have to continue to adapt; although, the majority of these adaptations were to a changing population and not a misunderstood environment. In 1905 the *Winnipeg Free Press* reported that the Cochrane Ranche, at the time down to 65,000 acres from its original 100,000, was sold to an American capitalist for six dollars an acre.⁵⁶ The new purpose for the land was colonization by Mormon settlers. For all of the environmental hardships faced by the Cochrane Ranche they were, ultimately, successful at adapting their ranching methods in those crucial years after the winter of 1886/1887.

⁵³ *Lethbridge News*. October 3, 1894.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁵⁴ Order in Council 1895-1741. <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/orders-council/Pages/search.aspx>

⁵⁵ *Lethbridge News*. May 16, 1894 and April 17, 1895.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁵⁶ *Winnipeg Free Press*. March 23, 1905.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

Significantly, they were able to remain a large operation and, through the process of trial and error, tailor their operation to fit (as well as possible) within the confines of the environment.

The Walrond Ranch

In the fall, before the hard winter of 1886/1887, the Walrond Ranch was awarded the contract to supply the Peigan and lower Blood camp with beef. These contracts were based on the weight of dressed, that is gutted and cleaned, beef and not a specific number of cattle. As has been noted, for the Cochrane ranch the winter was disastrous with respect to stock losses and those few cattle who survived were depleted. For the Walrond the stock loss was devastating. Additionally, they had the extra burden of having to use more cattle to fill their contract than they would have expected. Steers that had been raised on grass were ready for sale when they were roughly 1,500 pounds making their dressed weight nearly a ton. This meant that to fill an order the number of cattle required was about 20-25. However, as the cattle that came through the hard winter were considerably lighter it required more animals to fill the order, a substantial loss to the Walrond.⁵⁷

Further compounding the problem of weakened stock was that McEachran and Bell were slow to see the limitation of the Walrond grazing areas and continued to run more cattle than was optimal. It would be logical to think that the winter would have warned McEachran and Bell, but they were holding fast to the booster representations of the previous years. In order to square this circle, Bell argued that the problem was still the composition of their herd. To him, there were many old stock that were not capable of surviving, even in better circumstances. Other herds, like the Cochrane, had had their herds “cleaned up” in 1882/1883 and this winter was just the

⁵⁷ Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money*, 89.

Walrond herd ridding itself of inferior animals. For McEachran, the problem was not with the number of cattle or the grasslands, but with the neighbours. He argued that “There is no doubt that one half at least of our losses are referable to cattle from the north of us on to our range during the winter.”⁵⁸ McEachran’s inability to abandon booster representations of the environment was problematic. He continued to primarily rely on the Texas system of open range ranching that was unsuitable for the northern plains. This mode of ranching meant that infrastructure was not built, feed was not sufficiently harvested and too many cattle were kept. It has been argued that McEachran’s obstinance was related to his blind ambition to make money and utilizing the Texas system had by far the least amount of overhead.⁵⁹ However, this argument falls flat considering that by refusing to abandon his flawed system he put the Walrond in dire straits financially. It is far more likely that the experiences with a temporary equilibrium in combination with the abundance of misleading booster representations made McEachran reluctant to see the truth and take all necessary steps.

An important aspect of the greed argument was McEachran’s tendency to declare dividends without actually knowing the number of cattle and calves from year to year. Elofson argues that he calculated his numbers optimistically which allowed him to declare an increase of 5% annually, even when losses were clearly higher than average. An alternative explanation for McEachran’s unrealistic valuations were his equally unrealistic expectations of the environment, which also explain why he was so slow to see the truth. McEachran was far from the only rancher who was reluctant to see the environment for what it was. Simon Evans noted that the range manager of the Seven U argued that if he “could get through the winter on whisky then his

⁵⁸ Elofson, *Somebody Else’s Money*, 90-92.

⁵⁹ Elofson, *Somebody Else’s Money*.

stock could survive on snow.”⁶⁰ While many operations had management who, like McEachran and the Seven U manager, clung to booster representations, many did not. For example, the Bar U began feeding calves and by 1888 were keeping this vulnerable stock in a yard and feeding them all winter. In total the company fed 700 calves and their winter losses were essentially nil.⁶¹ These small changes are important because they indicate that those ranchers who did not make them still had fundamental misunderstanding of the environment.

Overall, the 1888 winter on the Alberta plains was good. The cattle and calves came through with very little winter loss. On June 18, 1888 Ottawa awarded the contracts for Indian supplies to “Hull, Trounce & Co., I.G. Baker & Co., Cochrane Ranch Co., Robert Scott and the Walrond Ranch Co.” it was also stipulated that all the beef used to fill the contract be raised in Canada.⁶² The lowest bid for the contract actually came from T.C. Power but as he did not have any cattle in Alberta he was disqualified.⁶³ The Walrond, despite the losses of the previous winter, was able to meet the needs of the contract. At the same time, the Walrond was restructuring by adding additional investors due to the need for capital. However, there was not to be much new capital as they were only able to attract two additional investors. An additional important change was to McEachran’s shareholder agreement. Where his previous shares were worth £500 and he had 10, they were now worth £10 and he had 500. He was also made vice-president and managing director. The new agreement allowed McEachran’s shares to increase in number and, hopefully, value over time. Furthermore, he was now earning a salary of \$3,000 annually. Considering the financial trouble resulting from the 1886/1887 winter and that

⁶⁰ Evans, *The Bar U*, 91.

⁶¹ Evans, *The Bar U*, 110.

⁶² *The River Press*, July 11, 1888. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

⁶³ *The River Press*, July 11, 1888. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

McEachran's financial stake was tied to the growth of the ranch, his decision to take a salary may be early evidence that he was unsure of the Alberta ranching industry's potential.

Modern range management techniques require a supply of winter feed, shelter, water and fencing. In short, modern methods reflect an understanding of environmental limitations that were slow to come to the Walrond.⁶⁴ The Walrond range was in some of the best grassed and watered areas of Alberta and seeing limitless potential was understandable. Following that, putting far too many stock and following the Texas system of ranching was also reasonable. However, what this system had engendered, even after 1886/1887, was a depleted range. A large part of this problem came from cattle's grazing habits and tendency to stay close to a water supply. As a consequence, the riparian areas around water where good grass was plentiful were noticeably damaged. For the Walrond this meant a substantial increase in feeding, perhaps the first and best indicator that McEachran had started to recognize his misunderstanding of the range.

Historians tend to look at the weather as being the main reason for stock loss but it was far from the only one. A further recognition of the problems with the environment was related to predation by wolves, a problem in Montana as well. After the extirpation of the bison, wolf numbers declined precipitously to the extent that they are rarely, if ever, mentioned by ranchers in the early years of the boom. However, when a food source, especially one that was far more docile than bison, was reintroduced their numbers recovered quickly. By the mid-1890s wolves had become an expensive pest for ranchers of beef and sheep alike. In 1894 W.D. Warnock wrote to McEachran that in "a few nights they killed ten head of yearling colts...cattle and

⁶⁴ Warren Elofson, "Grasslands Management in Southern Alberta: The Frontier Legacy," *Agricultural History* 86, no. 4 (2012): 145-154.

calves...”⁶⁵ A few months later *The Weekly Tribune* from Great Falls, Montana printed a letter from W.D. Warnock where he noted that the use of Wyeth strychnine tablets had been successful in ridding wolves from his section as he was able to collect a bounty on over 400.⁶⁶ Predation, much like the weather, continued to be a problem and was considered to be a part of the annual losses. However, poisoning wolves, as problematic as that seems, is not appreciably different than setting aside feed for cattle. Both are a recognition of a natural problems and demonstrate that ranchers were learning to deal with their environment.

McEachran and Bell were making some operational changes in the years following 1886/1887, but they were insufficient. The losses engendered the cutting of hay and the construction of limited shelter, although, only enough was set aside for the most delicate animals. These half-measures reflect both McEachran and Bell’s belief that the winter kill had only been of their weakest animals and significant investments were not necessary. Unfortunately, their small efforts were hampered by “An extensive prairie fire...on the Blood reserve...” which necessitated additional hay to compensate for the loss of grass.⁶⁷ In this instance, McEachran was making some changes which indicate that he had learned from the winter of 1886/1887, but that fact that they were done insufficiently suggest that he had not completely abandoned the booster representations which he had used to drum up money from investors. It could also be argued that he was reluctant to bear the additional costs of getting his range improved with fences, shelter, feed and water to the extent that winter losses would be no

⁶⁵ Letter, Warnock to McEachran, July 14, 1894, M8688, New Walrond Ranch Company Ltd Fonds 1883-1957, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

⁶⁶ *The Weekly Tribune*, October 19, 1894. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>

⁶⁷ *The River Press*, August 22, 1888, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

more than average. While it is tempting to argue for the power of greed it does not make as much sense as environmental ignorance.

The largest cost was for hay, which was both contracted out, in a similar vein as the Cochrane Ranch, and harvested from the property.⁶⁸ However, the amount of hay required was never put aside. There are two possible reasons why the Walrond was never able to set aside enough hay to feed their thousands of stock. First, the cost was immense and going to the shareholders and admitting that he was wrong about the Alberta environment was not something that McEachran was willing to do. Second, it is also possible that McEachran actually thought they were setting aside enough winter feed because he was still convinced of the Walrond's natural potential. There is no correspondence where he mentions one way or the other, all that can be known definitively was that there was not enough feed. Lack of feeding resulted in a consistent drop in weight for the Walrond stock and therefore profit.

In order to offset some of the loss of calves from both winter and predation McEachran imported "2,000 head of stockers" from Ontario. An advantage for these cattle is that they were older than calves and are able to forage for themselves through the winter.⁶⁹ The cattle would arrive via train in the spring and hopefully gain enough weight to survive and be sold a few years later. In an ideal situation these stockers were purchased for \$10 to \$15 and then sold a few years later for \$45 to \$50 with most of that being profit. On the surface buying stockers seemed like a good idea as it solved the problem of calves being killed by cold or predators; however, it also reflected McEachran's ongoing difficulty facing the reality of the environment. Ultimately, the answer to declining numbers was not more stock to make up the difference but less stock that

⁶⁸ Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money*, 111.

⁶⁹ *Lethbridge News*, October 23, 1895. <http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/>

could be better cared for. When the stockers were slaughtered a few years later they did not bring in the yields that McEachran had hoped for. The projected price was \$45 to \$50 dollars yet, due to their low weight, McEachran only got \$29.88.⁷⁰ McEachran came to recognize the limits of his environment with respect to winter kill of calves; but his solution to add stockers indicated that he was still holding on the booster representations for his range. It is hard to see an attempted adaptation, like adding stockers, as recognition of the limits of your environment and an attempt to operate within it but, by every metric except success, this was. It is worth illustrating again that adaptation is a process that most ranchers, farmers and settlers got wrong as often as they got right. McEachran, for all his faults, seems to have been trying to find the best way to run a successful ranch.

Warren Elofson argues that what McEachran should have done in response to the declining carcass weights was to pare costs by eliminating the dividend and then dramatically cut the size of the herd. The costs, most of which could be laid at the McEachran's feet, could then have been covered over time with a slow increase in yield from better fattened cattle. This is good advice. However, the problem for McEachran, and as a consequence the Walrond, was that he struggled seeing these solutions because he misunderstood the problem. Years of booster representations of the environment, coupled with an early temporary equilibrium, allowed McEachran to see this as a weather problem but not one that required a drastic downsizing of his operation. To do so would have flown in the face of everything he had been saying for nearly 20 years.

⁷⁰ Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money*, 138.

Environmental and economic problems would continue for the Walrond in the latter half of the 1890s ultimately resulting in the creation of an entirely new ranching outfit, the New Walrond Ranch in 1898. In an interview from Winnipeg that same year McEachran mentioned that “It is possible that in the course of two or three years our company will withdraw from the business altogether, the expectations of the shareholders as to profits, not having been realized. There is not much reason to grumble, as this is the only ranch in Canada which has continued to pay a small dividend ever since its commencement.”⁷¹ Soon after this announcement it was reported that the Walrond’s investors were pulling out. According to McEachran it would take about four years to dissolve the company completely.⁷²

After the dissolution of the Walrond ranch, McEachran reorganized the operation into the New Walrond Ranche Company Limited with himself as president. This final iteration of the Walrond was the period where the most significant environmental adaptations took place. The operation would persist to varying levels of success until 1946 when the last of the land was sold. In 1906 an exceptionally hard winter made the cattle operation no longer profitable and the Walrond stock were sold to Pat Burns in 1908⁷³. However, prior to that year McEachran and Warnock continued to work at adapting the operation in a slow but steady recognition of environmental limitations. For example, in 1901 there was a cold snap in March that could have been costly; however, more cattle than ever were now being fed. As a result, only 16 of the cattle being fed died of exposure. Along with supplementary feeding, steps were taken to ensure, as much as possible, that calves were born in the spring. Lastly, and most importantly, stock numbers were reduced.

⁷¹ *Lethbridge News*, January 2, 1895. <http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/>

⁷² *Lethbridge News*, June 12, 1895. <http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/>

⁷³ Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 135.

By the 1890s feeding was taken more seriously on the Walrond ranch. Winter feeding for cattle is an elastic cost due to the varying needs of cattle and the unpredictable prairie climate. However, considering the sheer number of cattle the Walrond owned the cost was considerable. Hay that could not be harvested on Walrond land had to be purchased from homesteaders at a cost that was relatively high. In 1893 Warnock wrote to McEachran that “417 tons of hay put up by contract at 3.75 per ton.” Some of that was hauled by ranch workers with the rest being moved by contract. Considering that the contractors charged a haulage fee of \$2.50 and the ranch workers had to be paid the cost of hay per ton was about \$5.00, or about the same as a ton of coal.⁷⁴ Additionally, some stock was contracted out, often to the Blood Reserve, for feeding at a cost of \$3.00 per head, per large animal, with the price decreasing proportionally with size and feed requirements.⁷⁵ What is important here is that McEachran and Warnock were setting aside additional feed by the 1890s, indicating that their environmental experience with the climate and the economic experience of selling underweight animals was coming together.

During the 1890s and early 1900s the Walrond also began to monitor and control breeding on their range. In practice, this had always been a difficult task on the open range. It was possible to keep the bulls you owned penned up in order to better organize breeding but, if your neighbour let theirs roam free all your efforts were wasted. It was also possible to build fences but unless the fence is monitored it could be knocked down or cut. Nevertheless, the Walrond pulled its bulls from the herd and as a result fewer calves were born out of season.⁷⁶ Calves born in the spring was an important environmental adjustment for two reasons. First,

⁷⁴ Letter, Warnock to McEachran, November 13, 1893, M8688, New Walrond Ranch Papers 1883-1957, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB; Lethbridge News, November 23, 1892, <http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/>; Cardston Record, August 13, 1898, <http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/>

⁷⁵ Letter, Warnock to McEachran, December 7, 1901, M8688, New Walrond Ranch Ltd Papers 1883-1957, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

⁷⁶ Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money*, 192.

calves were the most likely to die of exposure. Second, calves and cows who had recently given birth were the most likely to be preyed upon by wolves or coyotes. While controlled breeding seems like a small change it represents a departure from the Texas system where cattle were allowed to mix and fend for themselves. Furthermore, it also challenged the booster message of natural increase. For McEachran, managing the breeding cycle and knowing the reasons for doing so indicated an understanding of the limitations of Alberta's grasslands.

The final adjustment, decreasing herd size, was made during the 1890s and early 1900s. The decrease in overall cattle numbers was in recognition of the Walrond's depleted grasslands or perhaps as a way to depress feeding costs. In 1885, the Walrond was running almost 12,000 cattle spread across roughly 260,000 acres.⁷⁷ This was almost precisely one cow for every 20 acres as stipulated by the Dominion Government in order to protect a lease from cancellation.⁷⁸ Based on the experience of the Walrond ranch having this number of cattle was useful for protecting your lease but problematic for protecting your grasslands. By the 1890s McEachran seems to have figured that out. The herd was decreased by not renewing beef contracts and decreasing the number of stocker cattle brought in from Ontario. In 1895 the Walrond imported 2,000 stocker cattle and by 1901 that number was cut in half.⁷⁹ For the overall ranch the number of cattle would be almost halved as well, from 12,000 in 1885 to 7,842 in 1901.⁸⁰ The decrease in herd size was the final significant change made to the Walrond ranching methods and was, perhaps for this argument, the most significant. By reducing the herd McEachran had recognized

⁷⁷ Report for the Deputy Minister of the Interior, March 12, 1885, M1303, Cochrane Rancho Company Ltd Fonds 1882-1892. M1303.

⁷⁸ Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*, 186; *Lethbridge News*. <http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/>.

⁷⁹ *Lethbridge News*, April 25, 1901. <http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/>.

⁸⁰ Elsofon, *Somebody Else's Money*, 192.

that the ranching in Alberta had limitations and that booster representations, many of which he was responsible for, were inaccurate.

The decrease in herd size was certainly not the end of the ecological difficulties for the Walrond ranch. Poor weather, predators, and a still overstocked range continued to temper McEachran's optimism with disappointment. However, what truly ended the Walrond ranch was settlement. By the 1900s, the Walrond's range cattle were competing with smaller herds belonging to settlers and fences were going up all over the district, especially to enclose access to water. In 1901 several ranchers signed a letter asking that "the lake...be removed from settlement for stock watering purposes." The concern was that the "...party to whom the lease had been granted intends to fence the lake all around, and then drain it with the object of growing hay." The letter also requests that the "spring...be reserved from settlement for stock."⁸¹ This letter accurately reflected the anxiety that ranchers were feeling with respect to loss of their land and access to water. Despite making numerous adaptations, some more effective than others, the Walrond ran into another hard winter in 1907. The 1907 winter was similar to the 1886/1887 disaster in that it was a combination of cold and crusted over snow that caused the greatest problems. The losses felt by the Walrond were significant but with them was the realization that settlement was replacing stock raising as the dominant mode of land use in southern Alberta. As a consequence, in 1908 the Walrond ranch sold all of its cattle to Pat Burns of Calgary thereby ending their stock growing operation.

⁸¹ Letter to Dominion Land Office, Calgary Alberta, February 9, 1901, M3799, David Breen's Library and Archives Ranching Collection 1880-1926, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

The A7 Ranch

The 1886/1887 winter for Alfred Cross was especially ill timed as it was his first while in business for himself. As noted, Cross was not one to give up and began to restock almost immediately. Cross was different from many of his peers due to his business acumen. Cochrane, McEachran, Kohrs and Stuart were all skilled at the cattle trade; however, Cross was far more apt to see an opportunity to both make and save money. In 1889 he wrote a letter to his brother in Montreal suggesting that they import "...1,000 steers one year past in age first quality delivery on the boundary line duty paid also all quarantine expenses at \$20 a head each. I will look after them until they are marketed and will undertake to deliver them at the shipping point on the C.P.R..." Cross was certain that importing these cattle would be as success based on his experience over the winter of 1886/1887. He had noticed among his cattle that "...steers do not die." Furthermore, "the great beauty is that it does not tie one down to the business forever as would be the case with a mixed bunch of cattle."⁸² There is no evidence to suggest this plan was enacted; with respect to adapting to the environment on the Alberta prairies it shows that Cross was aware of the risks in becoming overly invested in stock that may not survive a severe winter.

According to historian Henry Klassen between 1888 and 1890 Cross had begun to cut hay to hand feed his cattle through the winter if required and was simultaneously grazing his cattle on his open pasture as well as adjacent unclaimed land.⁸³ In those same years, in order to protect his interests and the interests of the industry, Cross joined numerous stock raising associations. The *Lethbridge News* named him as attending the 1888 Alberta Stock Growers Association meeting representing himself and several other producers as a proxy. While in

⁸² Letter, Alfred Cross to Selkirk Cross, September 12, 1889, M339, Cross Family Fonds 1836-1987, Glenbow Museum and Archive, Calgary AB.

⁸³ Klassen, "Entrepreneurship in the Canadian West", 320.

attendance Cross was instrumental in organizing a spring round-up to take place at High River.⁸⁴ While this may not be a direct adaptation to the environment, many of the concerns raised by stock raisers, were, in fact, environmental. As a consequence, Cross' desire to be involved at an organizational level suggests a nuanced understanding of his industry and the environment.

In 1893 Cross, along with Cochrane and several other producers, set a five hundred dollar reward to "Any party giving information that will lead to a conviction of any person or persons killing, branding or otherwise illegally handling cattle..."⁸⁵ This type of advertisement, along with Cross's involvement with stock raising organizations, was an important adaptation strategy for a smaller producer. By 1896 Cross had become an important enough organizer that he helped to found the Western Stock Growers Association that held its first meeting in Fort Macleod in 1897.⁸⁶ For Cross, even more so than for Cochrane and Walrond, part of adapting his practice to the Alberta environment was to form organizations that ensured access to water, controlled disease outbreaks, regulated branding consistency, and ensured access to markets.⁸⁷

Complimentary to Cross's cattle business was his interest in brewing. However, Cross did not have the actual skills to make beer so he spent the winter of 1891/1892 at the Montreal Brewing Co. where he learned how to make ale. When prohibition ended in Alberta in 1892, Cross took advantage and started a brewery as a means of diversifying and mitigating his

⁸⁴ *Lethbridge News*, May 10, 1888.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁸⁵ *Lethbridge News*, July 13, 1883.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1> This advertisement appears often from this point forward.

⁸⁶ *Lethbridge News*, April 14, 1897.

<http://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/cdm/search/collection/sanews/searchterm/lethbridge%20news/field/title/mode/all/conn/and/order/date/ad/asc/cosuppress/1>

⁸⁷ For a further examination of institutional adaptations to the environment see: Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1931).

financial risk. In order to start a brewery Cross convinced two of his British friends, W.R. Hull and William E. Cochrane, to start the Calgary Brewing and Malting Co.; Cross had the controlling interest.⁸⁸ The beer business was not easy and despite being the only brewer in Calgary Cross was still forced to learn through trial and error, much like the cattle business. Ultimately, he was successful at his enterprise and, much like mining for Conrad Kohrs in Montana, Cross had an additional revenue generating business that he would use to replace stock and to offset any lost revenue from a fluctuating beef market.

An important aspect to Cross' success in ranching was that he reinvested much of his earnings back into the ranch, allowing his herd to grow from 581 in 1888 to over 1,000 by 1897.⁸⁹ Even at 1,000 cattle, Cross was running relatively few animals for the amount of land he leased or controlled. In the pivotal years between 1888 and 1897 Cross, despite moving to Calgary and running a successful brewery, remained active in the operations of his ranch. Largely due to his long time presence on the Alberta grasslands Cross was keenly aware of the need to irrigate near his ranch house to ensure a reliable hay crop. To facilitate a reliable hay crop, Cross made sure that ditches were dug channeling water from the creeks on his property. His background in veterinary science also gave in him an understanding of breed improvement. During the winter of 1886/1887 his herd was comprised solely of shorthorns; however, when they did not fare as well as he wanted he decided to breed better stock. He learned, much like Kohrs, that combining Herefords with Shorthorns resulted in a hardier animal that was still tractable.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Klassen, "Entrepreneurship in the Canadian West", 326.

⁸⁹ Klassen, "Entrepreneurship in the Canadian West", 321.

⁹⁰ Klassen, "Entrepreneurship in the Canadian West", 321.

Alfred Cross, perhaps more so than any of the other ranchers mentioned, was successful at adapting to the environment because he was a medium-sized producer and was educated in veterinary science. His adaptive measures were put to the test in 1906/1907 in another winter punctuated by severe storms and heavy snowfall. The cattle that were grazing in his fenced range and had access to shelter and water held up well, while he, like the Walrond, lost stock that were grazing on the open plains. The lesson was clear and influenced his next purchase of land. In 1909 Cross purchased an adjacent tract of land from the Federal Government, that gave him strategic control over water. Ultimately, what Cross had come to understand was that the additional land would allow for "...extensive improvements...and make the whole ranch as near a model one as possible."⁹¹

A great deal of blame has been assigned to stock raisers for engendering the 1886/1887 disaster through overstocking; however, that is an oversimplification. The abundance of booster representations, the only environmental information available, suggested that no such disaster could take place. Several early examples of temporary equilibrium in both Montana and Alberta reinforced booster representations making any stock loss to weather or predation seem, initially, as an aberration. Boosters had convinced ranchers that the plains of Alberta and Montana could not be overstocked and the climate was such that fences, hay, and controlled breeding were unnecessary. Obviously, boosters were wrong. The 1886/1887 disaster was born out of poor information and a particularly unfortunate series of environmental events. The significance of this event, therefore, was not the disaster itself but in how ranchers responded to it. Based on the Kohrs, Cochrane, Walrond and Cross ranches there was not one right way to try to adapt to the plains, although there were several wrong ones. Nevertheless, what was important was that

⁹¹ Klassen, "Entrepreneurship in the Canadian West", 322.

ranchers learned from their mistakes and slowly gained a better understanding of their environment.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

There is a tendency in environmental historiography to find fault for environmental mistakes as opposed to an explanation for them. This has engendered a preponderance of negative histories that end on an environmental low-point. The unintended consequence is that students of environmental history are constantly reading about humanity's missteps with nature and not the times where they tried to get it right. The story of cattle ranching on the Montana and Alberta borderlands is well positioned to explain the catastrophic failure leading up to the winter of 1886/1887, as well as the far less exciting attempts by ranchers at understanding the limitations of the environment and trying to adapt to it. It is worth remembering that cattlemen were human and subject to all humanity's failings. Expecting ranchers to come to Alberta and Montana, armed only with misleading yet completely believable information, and then operate a holistic ranch that balanced cattle, grasses and water evenly is expecting from the past what we do not from the present.

The complementary concepts of booster representations of the environment coupled with several temporary, accidental even, periods of equilibrium are central to understanding why ranchers understood their environment so poorly. The Baker and Power firms' financial success operating within a borderlands regional economy made it seem as though anything was possible. When Conrad Kohrs and Granville Stuart started their ranches they were met with resounding successes that reflected booster predictions for cattle raising almost exactly. The first indication that the climate was less amiable was when 5,000 Texas cattle froze to death in the winter of 1881. Despite this loss of someone else's stock, Kohrs and Stuart both felt that this was a

localized problem and not something that would ever affect the entire state. The winter of 1886/1887 changed their minds.

In the wake of the 1886/1887 hard winter Stuart left the cattle business altogether because he never again wanted to own an animal he could not shelter or feed. Kohrs was less dramatic and instead embarked on a mission to rebuild and improve his herds, adapt his ranching methods to better suit the Montana climate and decrease his dependence on public land. By every measure Kohrs was a resounding success. With respect to gaining a better understanding of the Montana environment what Kohrs did best was to expand his breeding operation at Deer Lodge and start growing feeding crops, like Timothy grass. He used his connections to continue to ship cattle to Chicago and used those profits to purchase as much land as he could because he recognized that the public domain was depleted from overstocking. It is challenging to see Kohrs as someone other than a wealthy businessman who used his connections to stay rich. Yet, his actions after 1886/1887 indicate a far more nuanced understanding of the limitations of the Montana environment than he had previously to the environmental challenges of the hard winter.

The Cochrane ranch began its operation in Alberta with high hopes but without the initial successes had by others in Montana. The immediate set back was not enough to deter several additional large stock purchases from Montana, illustrating the importance of the borderlands regional economy. However, the second setback in as many years led Cochrane to question the wisdom of running cattle in his northern ranges showing the first of his many attempts to come to terms with the limits of his environment. Cochrane started a mixed operation that included sheep, cutting hay for winter feed and keeping his stock as far south as he was able. By making several other moves regarding shipping and breeding, shorthorns mostly, Cochrane was able to find a near balance between running a successful cattle operation and the limitations of the

environment. Ultimately, what ended the Cochrane ranch was the goal of the Dominion government when he originally signed his lease, settlement. By 1905 the land the Cochrane was occupying was more valuable to settlers and so it was sold. While this seems anti-climactic it was fortunate as the winter of 1906/1907 was severe.

The Walrond ranch is perhaps the best example of all the case studies of how to not adapt to the Alberta grasslands. What is most important is understanding why so many mistakes were made and small changes, like setting aside enough winter feed, were not made sooner. A great deal of the problem was ranch manager and then vice-president Duncan McEachran. McEachran more than any of the other ranchers here held onto booster representations the longest. Unlike the others, he relied on the potential described by boosters to sell the idea of a ranch to investors and was a booster himself. When the hard winter hit, he saw disaster resulting from neighbour cattle encroaching on his grass. When his cattle were consistently decreasing in weight he decided to purchase additional cattle to make up the difference, as opposed to having fewer cattle and therefore more grass. When he endeavored to put up hay for wintering his vulnerable stock he did not set aside enough. Considering that other ranchers did more, McEachran was, even more than others, painted as rapacious and greedy.¹ It was true that he benefitted greatly from the Walrond but he would have benefitted far more had he run a leaner operation. As a consequence, despite making significant changes in the late 1890s and early 1900s, it seems more likely that McEachran was an optimist who was slow to abandon the booster representations that lured him to Alberta in the first place.

¹ Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money*.

Alfred Cross of the A7 is the anomaly here and was included in order to show that smaller ranchers did not fare better during the 1886/1887 winter as had been argued by other historians. Cross started his operation with the same level of optimism and booster misinformation as Cochran and McEachran and, like them, lost nearly all of his stock in 1886/1887. What made Cross better able to adjust was the relative size of his operation and his business acumen. Historians have often made the argument that because the large ranches were forced to scale down smaller ranches must have been better equipped to handle inclement weather, winter feeding, shelter and breeding.² The numerous changes made by Cross to his ranching methods, which were similar if not identical to large ranchers, indicated that the size of the ranch did not matter when the rancher had a fundamental misunderstanding of the environment. Cross and the A7 Ranch challenge the old and flawed argument that it was only the large ranchers who suffered.³

It is easy to see rancher's attempts at adapting their practice as a series of mistakes where they were trying to do the least they had to in order to be successful, but this is unfair. Ranchers in Alberta and Montana displayed great resilience in their ongoing innovations to the environment. What drove both was a misperception of the environment due to the plethora of booster material that characterized potential as reality. As a result, cattle were often brought onto the plains with little or no thought as to how they would survive because all of the information available suggested that they would be fine grazing on their own. As a consequence, the Texas system of letting cattle loose on the grass with little to no supervision was brought to both

² Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money*; Elofson, "Grasslands Management in Southern Alberta"; Osgood, *Day of the Cattlemen*; White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*; Brado, *Cattle Kingdom*; Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers*.

³ Osgood, *Day of the Cattlemen*; Terry Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers*; Elofson, *Somebody Else's Money*; Elofson, *Cowboys, Gentlemen, and Cattle Thieves*.

Montana and Alberta. Perhaps the best solution for ranchers was one that was the least likely to occur to them. If experience with the environment was the best way to understand it, consulting with the Indigenous population, many of who worked for the ranchers, would have been beneficial. However, the disdain with which Indigenous people on the plains were treated precluded any possibility that their advice would be ask for.

Previous scholarship by Osgood, Brado, White, Jordan, Elofson, and Breen treated overstocking as the central problem with ranching during the 1880s. This is hardly surprising considering in 1887, *The Rocky Mountain Husbandman* wrote “The fact that we now have to face is that the range of the past is gone; that of the present is of little worth and cannot be relied on in the future. Range husbandry is over, is ruined, destroyed, it may have been by the insatiable greed of its followers.”⁴ An example of the contemporary collective argument can be found in historian Richard White’s western history textbook: “The combination of overstocked ranges and the new fences were instrumental in the ecological disaster that cattlemen produced on the plains between 1885 and 1887.”⁵ Considering that this argument has evolved very little over the last 100 years, this study has addressed a disconnection in the historiography for environmental history on the north-western plains generally and ranching history specifically. This study does not challenge that ranchers had overstocked their ranges beyond their ability to care for them using the ranching methods of the day. However, what it does explain is *why* they were overstocked and the lessons learned from their missteps. It also repaints ranchers as people who made mistakes, but were not necessarily the rapacious capitalists as they have often been portrayed. With respect to contemporary anxieties regarding climate change, access to resources

⁴ Osgood, *Day of the Cattlemen*, 222.

⁵ White, *A New History*, 223.

and environmental degradation looking at history for lessons on how to successfully adapt is as important as looking for lessons of failure.

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